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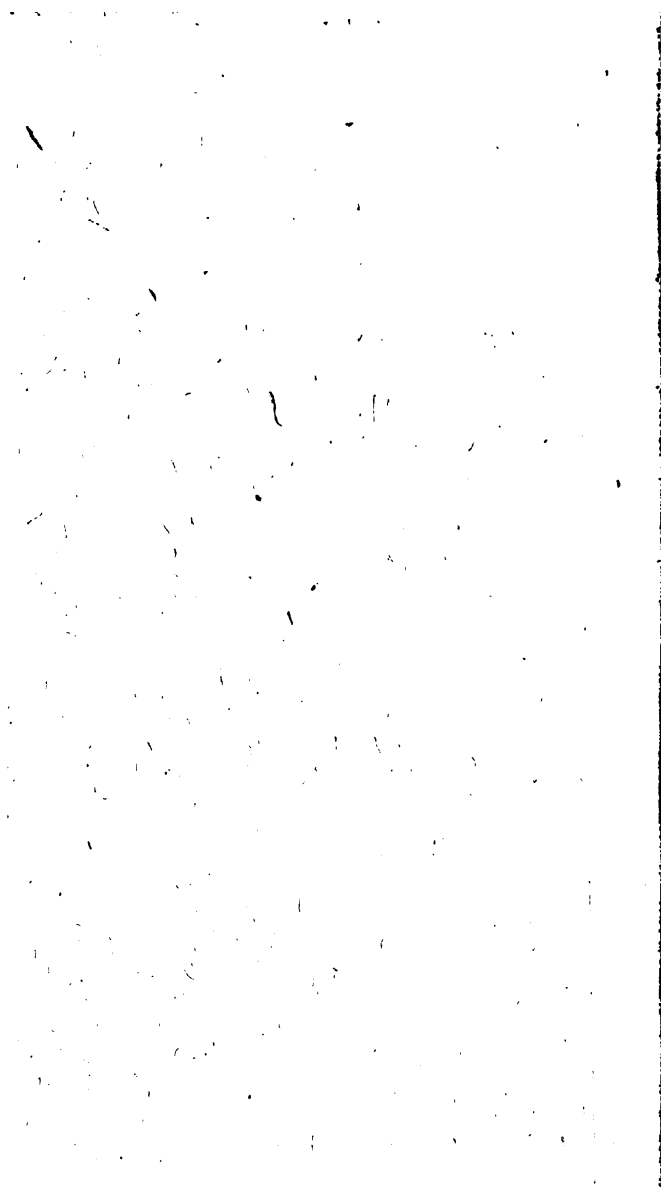
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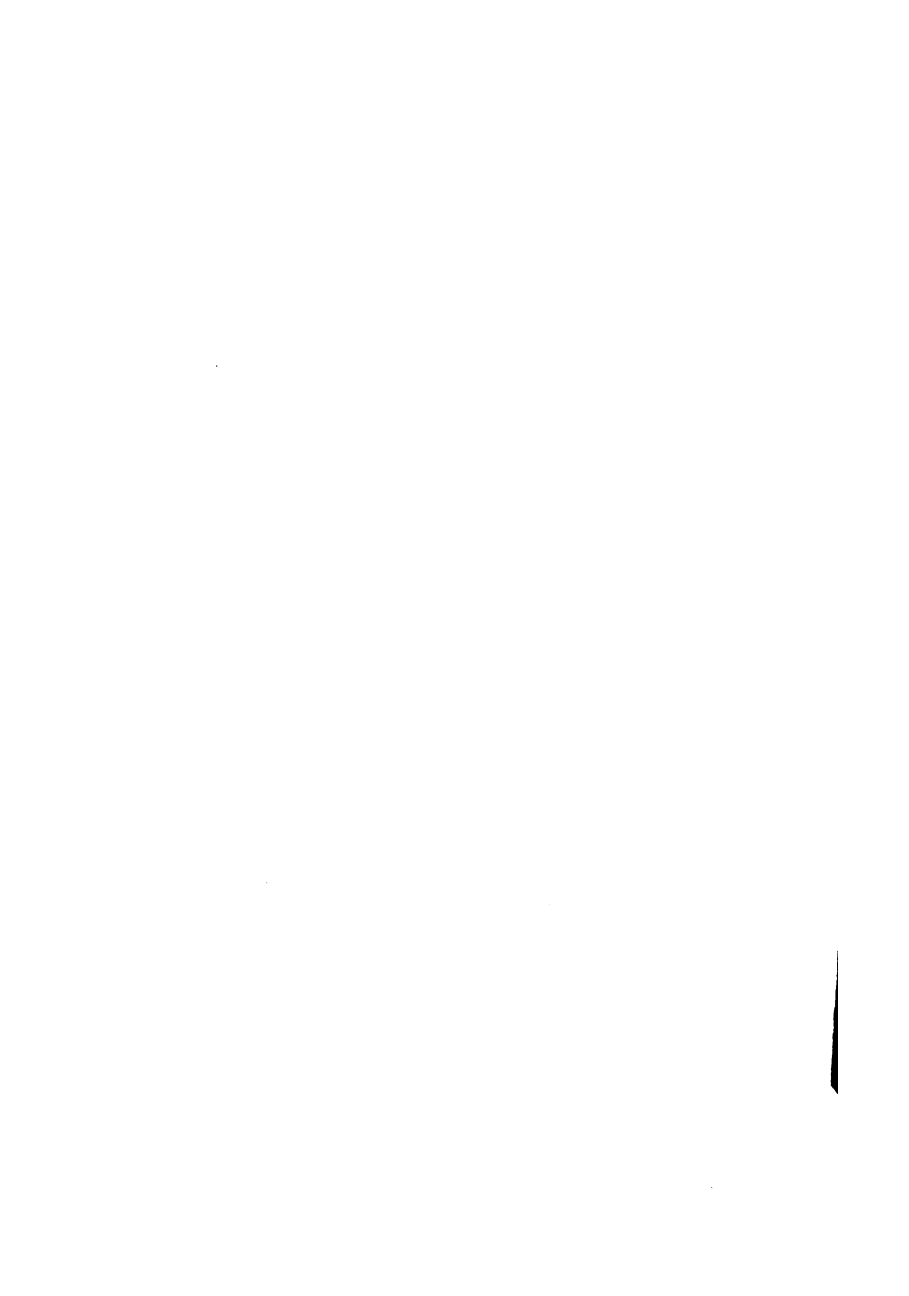


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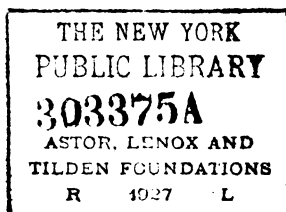
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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
PROLOGUE	I

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER.	
I. At Barford Vicarage	15
II. Cousin Steenie	21

BOOK SECOND.

I. Hillside	28
II. Mr. and Mrs. Limber	37
III. Elsie and her Uncle	42
IV. Mrs. Castles	51
V. Scheming	54
VI. Elsie at Hillside	59
VII. Elsie Makes a New Acquaintance	66
VIII. Dick Limber at Wortham	74
IX. A Tea Party	87
X. A Walk in the Lanes	94
XI. Dick Returns to the Farm	105
XII. Sam Brown	113
XIII. Mrs. Limber Learns the Truth	125
XIV. Good-bye	137

BOOK THIRD.

I. The Squire's Wife	150
II. A Sudden Departure	158
III. Peggy at the Farm	166
IV. An Afternoon Walk	176

BOOK FOURTH.

I. From America	191
II. Condolences	196
III. Mr. Martin's Will	203
IV. Mr. Limber Calls on Mrs. Short	211
V. <i>Elsie takes an Interest in "Stock"</i>	219

BOOK FIFTH.

	PAGE
I. Suspense	227
II. Hope	236
III. Mrs. Limber Hears the News	241
IV. The Vicar "Drops Diamonds and Pearls"	248
V. Mr. Limber Has His Own Way Again	255
VI. Peggy at Hillside Again	263
VII. Peggy and Dick "Are Two"	271
VIII. On the Cliff	279
IX. "Robin Adair"	286
X. Mr. Limber "Puts His Foot Down"	292
XI. A Dream	300

BOOK SIXTH.

I. At Mrs. Short's	305
II. Elsie Tells Her Dream	311
III. Mrs. Limber Puts on the Curb	320
IV. A Difference of Opinion	328
V. Christmas Eve	337
VI. An Anxious Moment	345

BOOK SEVENTH.

I. Mrs. Limber on Guard	354
II. From the Sea	362
III. By the Flag-Staff	370
IV. Dick and His Step-Mother in Council	374
V. Elsie and Dick	383

BOOK EIGHTH.

I. Christmas-Day	389
II. Brent Pays His Lawyer a Visit	396
III. The Shorts Hear the Good News	402
IV. Mr. Limber Pleads for Dick	409
V. Peggy Comforts Stephen	418
VI. Stephen Takes His Aunt's Advice	422
VII. "Better Late than Never"	438
VIII. "All's Well that Ends Well"	448
EPILQUE	457

HER SAILOR LOVE.

PROLOGUE.

A MAN lies dying on a bed in a small, low room at the top of a lodging-house in one of the narrow streets of an over-populated manufacturing town. Though the window is wide open, the atmosphere of the room feels thick and stagnant, and the sick man pants for breath as he lies open-mouthed on the bed. He moves restlessly, and his wild, haggard eyes are staring in search of something. . . .

Presently he says, "Harriet !"

At the sound of her name a girl rises from a cloak, which she has thrown down in a corner of the dirty floor, in which she has been lying wrapped, trying to sleep.

"Yes, father," but she stands waiting for him to speak; she does not go up to the bed and bend over her patient, or show any of the solicitude which a child naturally shows to a dying father.

His dry tongue moves, and the blackened lips open wider.

"Water—I am thirsty."

Then, as she puts a mug of water to them, he gives a cynical smile, which makes his face yet more ghastly.

"You 'll soon be free of me," he says, in a gasping, indistinct voice; "I've not troubled you much, child—some girls—slave through their lives—upper-servants to father or mother." He has to stop for breath, and she gives him more water. "Open—" he says, faintly, and he points his lean, trembling hand toward the window.

The girl knows that the window cannot open wider, but she goes to it and looks out. Smoke hangs over all, and the air she inhales cannot be called fresh, though it is easier to breathe in than in that of the sick-room.

"Harriet!"

She goes back wearily to the bedside, her delicately marked eyebrows knit into a frown. She is thin and worn, and her dark clear skin looks sallow, but it is easy to see that she is handsome, and that she would be far handsomer under happier circumstances. Her dress, though simple, is well made; if her silky black hair were less disordered, it would be fashionably arranged on her well-shaped head. She has large liquid dark eyes and a good nose; her mouth somewhat spoils her face; the upper lip is heavy, and the lower one too straight now that she frowns and closes her lips tightly. There is more evil than good in her face.

The man's eyes are fixed on her, and he cowers and shrinks away as she comes up to the bed.

"*Oh, Lord!*" he cries out, in a broken, hoarse way,

"don't look like that. I've done you no harm, child—I sha'n't trouble you long—they'll take you back again when I'm dead."

The scowl on her face increases.

"They'll never take me back," she says, sullenly. "If they would I'd never go."

The man closes his eyes, and groans.

"Her mother's pride all over—the old devil at work still."

He lay quiet for some minutes.

"I say, Harriet,"—he opened his eyes, but his voice was checked by coughing; a bright red spot rose on each cheek, while he struggled and fought awhile for breath.

The girl stood still; she was frightened and shocked, but she did not know how to help him, and her life had taught her to hide his feelings.

He lay still for some time after this, while the flush on his cheeks faded away again. When he looked at his daughter he smiled.

"Don't be afraid of—your—future," he whispered; "you're proud, and you want feeling—you'll do, you'll get the world under your thumb if you don't feel. Never feel, Harriet, it's the——"

He stopped; it seemed as if the power of speaking ceased suddenly.

The girl stood beside him, waiting, but he lay still, his eyes half closed. She waited some time, and then she

went back to her corner, and lay down. She got up once, thinking she heard a sound ; but her father lay as she had left him, his eyes half closed.

She did not mean to go to sleep, but she rolled herself in her cloak again, more to shield her from surrounding dirt than because she felt cold, and before ten minutes had passed she fell sound asleep.

She waked with a start. Had her father been calling ? She shivered as she rose up from her hard bed. The room was dark, the sunlight had gone, and a cool air was coming in through the open window.

She went up to the bed.

No ; he was lying with his eyes half closed just as she had left him.

"The doctor said if he slept he might recover."

She felt sick as this idea came, and before her rose a future of life as a wanderer, the associate of a mountebank.

"It is too late for him to rise now," she said, "and I must sink with him."

Surely it had grown late. Days were still long, and what a time it was since her father had asked for water.

His head lay toward the window ; what little light there was fell on his face. The girl went up and looked at him closely. It seemed to her that he must be cold, such a gray, fixed look had come in his face. She turned to the window, and closed it.

She went back, bent over him, and listened for his breathing.

"Are you cold?" she said.

There was no answer, no movement, and then a sudden impulse, more of horror than of fear, made her put her fingers against her father's cheek. It was like marble—so firm and cold. . . .

Harriet was not imaginative, but she felt absorbed by a wild terror. It seemed to her that she must fly at once from the Presence that shared the room with her, lest it should lay its cold clasp on her also. Her hair rose on her head, and she shivered violently.

Without a backward glance at the bed, she fled down stairs, till she reached the kitchen, where she knew the landlady would be found.

"Oh! Mrs. Dace," she said, "he's dead."

"Lord, miss!"

The landlady's shocked face steadied Harriet's nerves.

"Please do all that ought to be done," she said, calmly.

"You can let me have a room to lie down in, can't you? I can't stay up there, and I am worn out."

"Poor soul!" the landlady sighed; she was thinking of the dead man. "I wish he'd died somewhere else; but you need n't take any notice, and we'll keep it as quiet as we can. Yes, you can have my son's room; he's away just now."

She showed her lodger where to go, and then stood thinking.

"I can't make her out; has she got any feelings?"
the woman said. "I don't fancy she's shed a tear; but *she's got good clothes; she can pay, no fear of that.*"

Harriet had lain down without undressing, in a poor little room behind the kitchen, but she could not sleep. The events of the last few days stood up vividly and clearly, and acted themselves in her aching brain ; while behind these rose a vision of years long ago, when her mother had been alive, and she had lived with her and her father in a foreign town. When she tried to call up her dead mother, she could only remember a sad angry face that in the morning looked pale and wrinkled, and in the evening was beautiful and rosy.

The girl had lived most of her life at school, first as a pupil, and then as a teacher of music, until a year ago, when a lady, who visited the mistress of the Belgian school in which Harriet lived, had taken a strong fancy to her, and had engaged her to live with her in England as companion. Life in a beautiful English manor-house, with its elements of luxury and comfort, had seemed paradise to Harriet ; but from this year of bliss, the one oasis in her lonely, neglected existence, she turned with a sort of fury.

Mrs. Mainwaring was a rich, childless widow, with few relations to interfere with her, and she quickly surrounded her new favorite with luxuries which the girl had never seen before

There were going to be grand doings in the manufacturing town a few miles from the Abbey, the name of Mrs. Mainwaring's quaint and spacious manor-house. A large *party had been invited to stay in the house ; dinners and*

luncheons were to be given. Harriet looked forward to a week of constant amusement and admiration. But on the morning before the arrival of her guests, Mrs. Mainwaring said, at breakfast time :

“My dear, there is only one seat left in my carriage, the landau will be full, so you and Miss Fanshawe shall have the pony carriage for yourselves—little Lucy Mainwaring can sit between you.”

Harriet's eyes opened widely.

“Who is Miss Fanshawe?” she said.

Mrs. Mainwaring looked surprised, and a little annoyed.

“My dear, I told you I had asked my cousin, Mrs. John Mainwaring, and her little girl to spend this week with us. Miss Fanshawe is Lucy's governess. She will be your visitor, and you must try to make her enjoy herself, but it will be a treat to her to be with you,” she added ; for Harriet looked very grave. “The poor girl has a dull life at Farniecombe, and there are not Harriets everywhere. You shall have the small library quite to yourselves.”

She smiled pleasantly at her *protégée*, and turned away.

Harriet Gray stood beside the table till the pompous old butler came in and scattered her thoughts.

Then she went up to her own bedroom, and, when she had locked the door, she stamped violently on the floor by way of relieving her feelings. But as soon as she had *done this she smiled.*

“It’s time I left off being a baby,” she said. “I thought I’d taught myself that feelings must be governed and used—they must never assert themselves—it’s vulgar, just like a servant, to show what one feels, and a good servant doesn’t do it; she has trained her outside to hide all she wishes. Stop, I’ve seen little Lucy; she may be six, she can’t be more. This Fanshawe woman must be a mere nursery governess”; she stopped, looking still more angry. “Does Mrs. Mainwaring suppose,” she went on, “that I’m going to made a friend of such a person? does she really want all the people here and in the town to see that I am not treated as one of her guests? And I thought she adored me; what a fool I have been! I actually liked her a little, had even begun to believe in her. No, Mrs. Mainwaring, I drive into Repton with you as your friend, or I stay at home.”

But it was easy to say this, not so easy to put it in practice. At last she thought she would wait for Miss Fanshawe’s arrival before she came to any decision.

When she saw the governess, the shy, half-educated daughter of a poor country clergyman, she determined on her plan of action.

The Repton gayeties were to open with a concert in the Town Hall, and Harriet Gray told Miss Fanshawe they must start some time before the rest of the party, as the pony would not go as fast as the carriage-horses.

Long before the two large open carriages were ready, *Miss Gray had taken the timid governess and her charge*

round to the stable yard, and started off on a road which she knew would not be taken by the other carriages.

She managed so to irritate the pony, a spirited little beast, that, before she had driven a mile, he plunged, shied, and became seemingly so unmanageable that Miss Fanshawe lost all self-control and jumped out of the carriage, and when she rose from the road she found that she had sprained her ankle.

Miss Gray was most sympathetic ; gently blaming her imprudence for jumping out, she helped her into the carriage, and drove quickly back to the Abbey. The carriages had just driven up to the door when she reached it.

There was some lamentation over Miss Fanshawe's accident ; a messenger was sent off in the pony carriage for the doctor, and then Mrs. Mainwaring told Harriet that there would be room for her in her carriage. Little Lucy had been so terrified by the plunging pony and the accident that she refused to go out again.

Harriet was radiant at her success ; she was so bright and pleasant, and kept her companions so well amused, that Mrs. Mainwaring wondered how she could have thought of doing without her. Harriet guessed truly at her benefactress' feelings, they showed so plainly in her face ; and, as she lay now in the squalid room at Repton, the remembrance of that look roused her to fury.

" She worshipped me—that she did, and, but for him *she would be worshipping me still.*"

She remembered how they saw a crowd scattered on one side of the open space in front of the Town Hall, and how the carriages came to a standstill while a way was made for them to pass.

Harriet and her companions were so gay and full of enjoyment that every little incident amused them ; they bent forward and looked at the crowd ; it had collected round a man flashily dressed ; who was mounted on a tub, and held out a showy watch-chain, which he said was worth fully two pounds, and which he was offering for two shillings. His face was toward the carriage, so that he had seen its occupants before they distinguished him in the closely pressed crowd in which he stood. Harriet met his eyes fixed on her face, and she grew pale suddenly ; she could not take her eyes from his.

All at once he pulled off his hat, made her a low bow, and calling out, "*Adieu revoir, ma fille !*" he turned away, and recommenced the praise of his chain.

"What an impudent fellow !" said the only gentleman in the carriage. Some of the ladies laughed. Mrs. Mainwaring had seen Harriet's sudden paleness, and had heard the words, and, as she told her afterward, had guessed the truth.

She was a good woman, but, in spite of the impulsive generosity which had more than once led her into scrapes, she had the greatest possible horror of a scandal, of giving any offence to Mrs. Grundy. When she reached home *after the concert*, she gave orders that, if any one called

to see Miss Gray, he was to be shown into her business-room, and that no notice of his visit was to be given to Miss Gray. She had exerted herself on the way home to appear quite undisturbed, and she had remarked with surprise that Harriet was even gayer than usual.

All this the girl learned on the miserable afternoon nearly a week afterward, when Mrs. Mainwaring sent a letter to her bedroom, telling her that she had had an interview with her father, and had learned particulars which made it best that she and Harriet should part.

- "I have been waiting till my visitors went," the letter said, "so as to avoid any scandal, but the enclosed note, received this morning, will show you that your proper place now is by your father's sick-bed. Do not come here again, and spare me the acute pain of saying Good-bye ; but write to me if I can help you ; the carriage will take you to Repton station, and then a cab will take you on to your father's lodgings. You must know how all this has grieved and upset me."

When she read this, Harriet said she would never write to the woman who could throw her aside so easily. Certainly Mrs. Mainwaring said how sorry she was, but evidently she shrank from the girl's personal influence, for when, utterly disregarding the prohibition in the letter, Harriet went to her friend's room and asked for admission, she was told that Mrs. Mainwaring had gone out for a drive, and *was not* expected to return till evening.

When the girl went back to her room, swelling with

rebellious mortification, she found Mrs. Mainwaring's own maid, a quiet, discreet woman, packing her clothes. The woman was so silent, yet so respectful, that Harriet could find no excuse for resistance.

She went away ; and she found her father—she had not seen him for two years—lying in his miserable room, too ill to heed her reproaches. . . .

"There 's no use in crying," she says, harshly, "and I can't afford to do any thing that 's not useful. I am clever—I must be—everybody says so, and I can succeed if I only try. Why should not all this be the dream and the other the reality." She looked round her, and shuddered again, as she remembered what lay upstairs. "Poor father, he, at least, has escaped from this life of slavery."

But, before she gave orders about a coffin for her father, she sat down and wrote to Mrs. Mainwaring. She asked her to take her back to live at the Abbey, "now that my shame is for ever out of sight," she ended.

"She will not do it, of course. She likes me, and she misses me dreadfully ; but she is too great a coward to brave the remarks of her friends, and this story will have reached them through their maids, even if they did not notice any thing. But Mrs. Mainwaring must provide for me somehow ; she can't leave me to starve, and she knows I won't take money from her I have n't earned."

On leaving the Abbey Harriet had left behind her *the handsome sum that Mrs. Mainwaring had added to the salary due to her companion.*

Harriet sent her letter, and on the afternoon of her father's funeral, while she was away, the answer came.

"She will not have me again—she could not," she said to herself, and yet when she read Mrs. Mainwaring's note, her disappointment told Harriet that she did not yet understand herself.

"A teacher in a school! Is that all she can find for me? I shall never be free of the brats, and have to walk out with them in couples like the animals in Noah's ark."

At first she thought she would refuse; it would mortify Mrs. Mainwaring, who had evidently taken personal trouble in the matter, and who seemed to consider the finding a post for her so quickly almost miraculous.

"But, if I refuse, she may consider herself quit of me, and I hate Miss Jones too much to go back to Bruges. No, I will accept the offer; at any rate, I shall get enough to eat in an English school—it is only a step, and I must use it well. Who knows what it may lead to?"

She sat down, and accepted the situation Mrs. Mainwaring had found for her.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

AT BARFORD VICARAGE.

THE vicarage of Barford was as pleasant a little vicarage as any in South Devon, and the Reverend Septimus Short was well suited to his abode. He was amiable and simple, and a thoroughly good parson. The one inharmonious point concerning him was that his name was Short, and he was tall. However, he had reached middle age without any more serious consequences arising to him from the contradiction than the usual "chaff" attendant on such mistakes of sequence between a name and its owner.

It is a bright July morning, and the vicar sits at his breakfast, dressed with more precision than country parsons usually affect, looking, perhaps, happier and more pleasant than any one of his neighbors for miles around. He is reading his letters.

Mrs. Septimus Short, more happily named than her husband, now pouring out the coffee, is a good specimen of a country parson's wife, round and pretty in face and figure; altogether comfortable-looking, with the air of a

notable housekeeper, and indeed she is this desirable thing in a house ; she keeps all things in order, her husband included.

Beside Mrs. Short sits her daughter Margaret, named after her, and familiarly called "Peggy," a light-haired, blue-eyed, blooming girl of seventeen. She is looking intently at her school-friend on the opposite side of the table, Harriet Gray, a teacher at the boarding-school in St. John's Wood, where Miss Short is being educated. Peggy knows that Harriet is an orphan, and poor, and she has asked her to spend the summer holidays at her father's vicarage, and Miss Gray has been established at Barford Vicarage more than a fortnight.

The vicar lays down a letter he has been reading.

"My dear," he says to his wife, "you will be glad to hear the gooseberries have sold very well—remarkably well." He takes up another letter. "I do believe here's a letter from Steenie. Yes, it is ; his ship has come home ; he is in London, and he hopes he shall be with us to-morrow evening. That's good news !" He leans back to enjoy it.

"Oh, how delightful !" cries Peggy, clapping her hands. "Oh, I am so glad !"

Miss Gray looks interested.

"Yes," says Mrs. Short, "that is more interesting news than the sale of the gooseberries."

Steenie is her nephew, and a great favorite with his aunt ; indeed he is the only person who may be said to be able to manage Mrs. Short.

Breakfast is over, the vicar gathers up his letters and newspapers and goes to his study. His wife walks away with her key-basket, and the two girls are left alone.

"Come out into the garden, Peggy dear, and tell me about this cousin. He must be nice; you all seem so pleased at the idea of his coming."

"To be sure we are, and it will be especially jolly for you and me. He's so nice. Why, he'll flirt with us, and play croquet with us, and take walks with us. Oh! I can't tell you what a capital fellow he is."

Harriet Gray laughs at her young friend's enthusiasm.

"Yes, it will be very pleasant to have some one to protect us from tramps, and bring in our mallets and balls. But tell me, dear," she goes on, carelessly, "is he young or old, is he short or tall, merry or sad?"

"Ah!" laughs Peggy, "I knew you were dying of curiosity to hear about Steenie. I should be if I didn't know him, I'm sure. Well, dear, he's not bad-looking, and he's rather tall, and, you know, that is very remarkable, for sailors are generally short"—Peggy asserts this as if she has a large acquaintance in the navy—"they climb better for it, you know."

"You funny child," says Miss Gray; "but go on. How old is he?"

"To me he seems quite old—I believe he is nearly thirty. He's cheerful enough when he likes, but he can be cross, I can tell you, and he has a sort of masterful way with him. Mamma adores him—but I don't think

he's as perfect as all that ; I tease him and laugh at him."

"Ah, I see, he is not good-tempered."

"Oh, yes he is—I tell you he's delightful, he's the best fellow that ever lived—full of fun and so kind. He does n't really mind my teasing—we're excellent friends."

"He must be charming if he's all you say."

Harriet Gray has been keenly watching her young companion's face while she describes her cousin, and she decides that there is only cousinly feeling on her side—at any rate.

She walks on silently, and Peggy gazes into her friend's dark face and thinks how handsome she is—how rich her complexion—how brilliant the dark eyes are—and what a wealth of splendid black hair she has. Peggy has no eyes for defects in her friend or she would think Miss Gray's mouth injured the rest of her handsome face. And yet it is far from an ugly mouth, and the red, smiling lips show white, even teeth within them—but there is an expression about her mouth and at times about her eyes, that would make a keen observer question the truthfulness of Miss Gray.

She is of middle height, her figure is well rounded ; a little too full perhaps for her age—though there are grace and a certain fascination in her movements. She wears black always, and it suits her ; she is far handsomer than she looked in the squalid room at Repton ; but she is deficient in that greatest charm of all in a woman—unconsciousness. It is a wonder she is unmarried—the best

explanation of this lies in the fact that she is still only a poor teacher in the school to which Mrs. Mainwaring recommended her.

"A penny for your thoughts," says saucy Peggy.

Miss Gray starts—all this time she has been walking on in silence thinking. Who could say that she would not find an escape from the slavery of the St. John's Wood school in Peggy's cousin ?

Dinner was over next day at the vicarage. The vicar, his wife, and daughter, and Miss Gray were in the drawing-room. Comely Mrs. Short was knitting something in gaudy red and blue, which would have driven an "æsthete" mad to look at ; Miss Gray was playing a valse of Chopin's—she was a brilliant performer ; Peggy hung over her, devotedly turning the leaves of the music, while the vicar beat time with foot and head.

The door opened and the servant announced Mr. Brent.

There came in a tall, manly-looking fellow with bright, brown curly hair clustering above his broad forehead and honest gray eyes.

He shook hands heartily with his relations, and looked at their visitor.

"Ah, to be sure, Steenie," said the vicar, "let me introduce you to Miss Gray—a great friend of Peggy's—my nephew, Mr. Stephen Brent, my dear."

Miss Gray's smile and courtesy were given with all the

fascination she had at her command, but it was easy to her to do this, for the sailor was just the kind of man she admired.

Stephen Brent thought Miss Gray very handsome—but he was not impressed favorably by her manner, and this impression deepened as the evening advanced.

“She’s a handsome, well-built girl,” he thought, as he turned into bed, “but there’s something in her I don’t quite like; there’s a want of simplicity about her. She’s not fit to hold a candle to dear little Peggy—who is as open as the day,—and how pretty the little monkey has grown.”

“Little Peggy” always went to Miss Gray’s bedroom for a talk before they separated for the night. The young girl was eager to-night to know her friend’s opinion of Steenie.

“Tell me, is he not a nice, dear fellow, Harriet?”

“Yes, he is very agreeable, though, as you led me to expect, he is masterful at times. However, I like a man to have an opinion of his own, and to hold to it.”

“Yes, dear, and when you think how much he knows, and how much he has seen, I’m sure he’s really modest. Why, he has been half over the world.” Peggy flushed a little; she was not satisfied with her friend’s praise.

Miss Gray smiled. “Do you know, Peggy, I believe you are a little in love with him.”

“Not a bit, darling; he’s just like a brother to me. *You’re quite welcome to win him and wear him. Do*

you know what he whispered to me when he said Good-night?—‘Your friend is very good-looking, Peggy.’”

“You naughty girl!” Miss Gray patted her cheek playfully. “I’m sure I’m greatly obliged to him for his good opinion, but I don’t feel at all in love with him at present.” Miss Gray laughed. “Now go to bed, Peggy; it’s very late.”

But, when Peggy had departed, Harriet Gray thought a good deal of the handsome young sailor as she got ready for bed, and, indeed, she fell asleep still thinking of him. She dreamed of him, too, and when she waked in the morning he was her first thought. She wondered if he had any thing to live on besides his pay.

CHAPTER II.

COUSIN STEENIE.

SEVERAL days passed very pleasantly at Barford Vicarage with the young people; croquet, walks, music, and conversation helped to pass away the time. The young sailor was a great favorite; his aunt spoiled him, Peggy amused herself with him in cousinly fashion, but Harriet Gray had lost her heart to him, and she did not know how plainly she showed her feelings in her eyes.

When first she heard he was coming to the vicarage, *she had said to herself*, “This may be a chance for me,”

but now worldly considerations were not so much thought of—for the first time she was in love.

There was no touch of sentiment or romance in Harriet's love, but she was absorbed by it, and she was determined to be loved in return.

Peggy had told Steenie Miss Gray's story when he questioned her about her friend.

"Poor dear thing," she said, "it is very sad for her. She seems to have hardly a friend in the world. She had a brother in Australia who sent her money sometimes, but he died last year. She has no one to go to in the holidays, so I got mamma to ask her, and she's so nice and so clever and amusing—don't you think so, Steenie?"

"Yes, she's clever, and she's very handsome, and you're a kind little girl, Peggy."

Stephen Brent greatly admired the visitor, and flirted with her not a little. They took walks and had long talks; now and then his admiration cooled, and he went back to his first impression. "She's artificial, and not over-sincere," he thought, and he devoted himself to Peggy, and rather avoided her friend; but Miss Gray soon won him back, and he seemed as devoted as ever.

On the morning of the day when he was to leave Bedford, while he was alone in the drawing-room waiting for his aunt, Harriet came in with a book in her hand.

"Noted sweetly at Stephen.

You're giving the book, Mr. Brent, you said you would like it and she offered it to him.

"Thank you very much," he said, "but I fear I shall not have time to read it before I go."

She looked suddenly grave.

"You are not really going to-day?" Then, as he nodded, "I did not believe it when Peggy told me," she said, sadly. "I did not think you could go away so soon." She waited, but he stood silent. "Well then, please take this book with you, and return it to me when you like; there is no hurry. Please keep it as long as ever you want it. It may make you think of me sometimes."

Her beautiful eyes held his, and there was an appeal in them which he could not help understanding. They certainly were very beautiful eyes, and, as he looked into them, he was flattered by her regret.

"Thank you, you're very kind," he said. "I am sorry I have to go to-day, but the best things must come to an end, you know."

He gave her an expressive look. The color rose in her cheeks, and her eyes glowed with feeling.

"We shall miss you—oh, so much!"

Stephen Brent's eyes actually drooped beneath the glance that accompanied these words; it seemed to thrill through him.

"I am sure you are very kind to say so. Just think, then, how I shall miss this pleasant life."

But Miss Gray was not looking at him now. She gazed pensively at the carpet.

"*What a strange thing* friendship is," she said, medi-

tatively. "Ten days ago life was so barren and so dreary to me ; I never dreamed I was on the eve of such a friendship as yours. You have been so kind to me." She looked at him again, but her eyes fell in confusion under his now calm gaze. "Please believe I am deeply grateful," she said, in a low voice.

"Pray don't think of it."

Stephen Brent longed for a fresh topic, but one did not come readily. There was a pause, and then he said, hurriedly.

"Do you know where Peggy is, Miss Gray?"

She started. She thought he was going to say something very different—a precious word or two that she might have treasured. He had been scarcely five minutes alone with her, and already he wanted Peggy ; yet how he had looked at her just now ! She would not give him up.

"I don't know." She spoke coldly. Then, seeing that he made no effort to go in search of his cousin, she went on : "Peggy was only saying this morning, she wondered when we three should all be together again."

She looked at him, and this time she spoke tenderly ; her feelings showed ardently in her eyes.

Stephen Brent looked away. It was pleasant to look at Miss Gray, but something warned him to take care.

" 'When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?' " he said, with a laugh.

Miss Gray bit her lip. She could not understand him.

Surely he admired her, and cared for her ; he must have meant something just now by that look of his, something warmer than mere admiration. But Stephen felt that he must escape without delay.

"Will you excuse me?" he said, politely. "I fancy I see Peggy, and I have something to say to her."

As he dashed out through the glass doors—"By Jove!" he thought, "that girl makes one feel like a fool. She's a dangerous girl with those eyes of hers. Hang it, I've brought away her book! I suppose I must keep it now; it won't do to hurt her feelings by returning it."

"He is as cold as a stone," the girl said, stamping her foot passionately. "What a fool I am to waste my thoughts on him; but what can I do? Ah! he has taken the book with him; if he reads it he will see the passages I have marked. I wonder if he cares for any one else? I'm sure it's not little Peggy . . . I am worse than a fool to let a man see that I care for him."

"Uncle," said Stephen Brent later in the day, after he and the vicar had been talking over some business matters, "I want to say a few words about Miss Gray."

The vicar opened his eyes, and screwed up his mouth.

"What, my dear boy? You don't mean to say——?"

"Oh! no, nothing of the kind," Brent interrupted, laughing. "She's not my sort of girl. It's about her and Peggy. I don't seem to care for the warm friendship there seems to be between them."

"*Why, what's against poor Miss Gray?*"

"I don't want to say anything against her, but it seems to me she's too old a companion for dear little Peggy, and—and—well, uncle, you know what I mean."

"Upon my word, Steenie," said the vicar, elevating his eyebrows, and gently rubbing one whisker, "that is rather a vague opinion."

"Well, perhaps it is." Stephen hesitated; he could not bear to speak against Miss Gray, and yet he felt she was not a fit associate for his little cousin. "I dare say you'll laugh, uncle, but dear little Peggy is as fresh as a daisy, and I don't want her to get any of her childishness rubbed off by talking to girls so much older than she is."

The vicar gave a grunt, and then he looked slyly at Stephen.

"I'm sure Peggy ought to be grateful to you"; and then he talked of something else. But, when he was left alone, he said to himself: "Now I thought Peggy's friend a very pleasant young woman. However, my wife says she is forward with young men. I fancy it's a way girls have got nowadays. Perhaps we had best not ask her here again."

"Let me know what you think of that story," Miss Gray said, when Stephen Brent was bidding good-bye to them all; "but please do not hurry to return the book."

Her manner was quite calm, almost cold, though her cheeks were flushed, and she hardly smiled as she shook hands with the sailor.

The vicar was watching her.

"That was a very proper and modest way of saying good-bye, I must say," he thought. "I believe Margaret is hard on the girl."

It was evident Harriet Gray had played her cards very well as far as the Reverend Septimus Short was concerned.

She hurried to her room. She threw herself face downward on her bed, writhing with mortification and disappointment.

"I hate him—oh ! I do hate him," she said, bitterly.

She rose up after a while and pushed her hair off her face.

"I believe he does care for me," she thought, "only he is afraid of that hateful Mrs. Short."

BOOK SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

HILLSIDE.

AT the foot of a gently rising hill, a large, irregularly built, old-fashioned farm-house of red brick and stone stands basking in the brilliant light of a spring afternoon. The farm buildings themselves are nearly all in the shadow cast by a picturesque group of fresh, green trees on the left of the dwelling-house. The garden in front is gay with spring flowers, chiefly white, yellow, and blue.

The open sheds and a noble barn have thatched roofs, many-colored in parts with mosses and houseleek. All around looks prosperous and in good order.

The door of the house is wide open, showing a large flagged hall. On a table in the centre of this hall is a huge nosegay of lilac, arranged with some taste in a blue and white china bowl ; in one corner stands a tall clock in an old-fashioned case ; hats, coats, sticks, and riding-whips fill another corner. At the end opposite the entrance is another heavy oaken door, leading to the *house-place, once the entrance of the old manor-house.*

The best parlor, on the right of the hall, is panelled with oak ; heavy beams cross the low ceiling. Beside the broad window, deeply recessed and looking into the garden, sit the master and mistress of Hillside. Their early dinner is over ; for Mr. Limber is an old-fashioned man, and, though this is one of the customs of the house that the new Mrs. Limber dislikes, she has not yet succeeded in her wish to have the dinner-hour altered. When she became mistress of Hillside, the family took their meals in the house-place, but she changed this at once.

Mr. Limber is enjoying his after-dinner pipe. He is over fifty, tall, and heavy-limbed, ruddy of face, with good, strongly marked features, and an amiable, rather bovine expression ; his hair and whiskers are turning gray, in other respects Time has been lenient to him.

Mrs. Limber is nearly twenty-five years younger than her husband. They have only been married a few months, and she is his second wife. It is not necessary to describe her. She is little altered since her visit to Barford Vicarage ; for Mrs. Limber was Harriet Gray, the "companion" and the poor teacher.

Several weeks after her return to the school at St. John's Wood with Peggy Short, Miss Gray received the book she had lent to Lieutenant Brent, with a few words of thanks, *and an apology* for having kept the volume so long. "*But, to be honest,*" the young man said, "*I forgot*

all about it till the other day"; and, with kind regards and love to his cousin, the writer ended the brief epistle.

Miss Gray felt bitterly disappointed. She had hoped, when he returned the book, that Stephen Brent would express an opinion on its contents, and also that he would make some references to the passages she had marked, and to the time they had spent together at Barford Vicarage.

However, she seized the opportunity given by his letter, and wrote to him. She playfully reproached him for not keeping his promise to tell her how he liked the book; and then she gave him an amusing account of the school-life she and Peggy had begun again, contrasting it with the delightful days they had passed together at the vicarage. She scribbled on through several pages of note-paper, and ended by asking him if "his ears did not often burn, for Peggy and I are constantly talking about you."

To this appeal Miss Gray vainly waited for an answer, and she was too proud to write again.

Peggy often talked of her cousin and teased her friend about him.

"I know you like him, and he's fond of you," she said. "And his old cousin will die soon, and he's ever so rich, and he will leave his money to Steenie, and then he will give up the sea."

And Miss Gray felt more than ever in love with the *young sailor*.

But one day Peggy received a letter from her mother. Mrs. Short said the vicar was ill, and wished to see Peggy at once; it had been arranged that her cousin Steenie would call the next day at the school to take her home.

The poor child, in much distress, showed the letter to her friend. Harriet, too, was troubled at the news. If any thing serious should happen to the vicar, Peggy would probably not return to the school, and then her chances of seeing Stephen Brent again would be over.

"I will not leave any thing to chance," she said. She resolved to see him when he called at the school to fetch his cousin.

To effect this she represented to the school-mistress that she believed Miss Short's father was much worse than Peggy feared. Would it not be kind to the dear child if Mr. Brent were cautioned before he saw his cousin? "Mr. Brent may blurt out the bad news suddenly," she said, "and give Peggy a terrible shock. He is an honest, well-meaning young man, but sailor-like, and rather rough and ready in speech." Her heart smote her for speaking against him, but she knew this would be a strong argument, for the school-mistress was gentle and tender-hearted. The kind woman fell into the trap, and agreed that Miss Gray should receive Mr. Brent when he arrived.

Stephen Brent arrived punctually at the time fixed by Mrs. Short, and he was shown into the parlor.

Before he had time to look at any of the curiosities in the shape of needle-work which so plentifully decorated the room—the offerings of her pupils to their school-mistress—the door opened, and in came Miss Gray.

Stephen felt annoyed, and, being taken by surprise, he was grave and rather stiff; but Harriet thought this was only natural, considering the critical state of his uncle.

“Peggy will not be long, I hope?” he said. “I fear she has no time to lose.”

“I came to tell you she is almost ready, and also I came to ask you to break it gently to the poor child. I fear she hardly realizes her father’s state. He is very ill, is he not?”

She fixed her eyes, full of sweetest sympathy, on the sailor’s face; he thought how beautiful her eyes were, and he forgot his prejudice against Miss Gray.

If she had only cared less for him she might, at least, have won his esteem; but she was too impatient to be prudent. Her tongue undid the work her eyes had done.

“But for my fear of this,” she gave him a sudden, swift glance, and then her eyes dropped under his steady gaze, “I should not have come to see you. I have a quarrel with you, you know.”

“A quarrel, Miss Gray! How’s that?”

She looked at him, and she saw that he was really *perplexed*.

"Well," she felt piqued by his indifference, "is it not usual to answer a lady's letter?"

"Ah! I am sure I beg your pardon, but I thought your letter was in answer to mine. I did not think you expected an answer. It was very kind of you to write to me, but I did not expect it.

He was drifting farther and farther away from the point she wished to keep him to, and, worse than all, he was looking impatiently toward the door.

"I see I was wrong," she said, sadly; "but please forgive me, my life is so very lonely, so very friendless, that you can hardly tell what your friendship was to me, or how I prized it when it came so unexpectedly. I have so looked forward to seeing you again; but never mind, I am so ignorant of the world that I am sure to get rebuffs. I see that what to me was the great joy of my life, the first real happiness I ever knew, was—to you a mere passing feeling—forgotten in an hour."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and wiped her tears away roughly, as if she were angry with them for coming just then.

Stephen Brent was beginning to wish most earnestly that he had not come to fetch Peggy. He was very sorry for Miss Gray, but he thought she was sentimental and silly. After all, he had only spent a week with her at Barford Vicarage, and they had never been real friends; *but he felt that he must have behaved badly to her, or she must somehow have mistaken his manner to her,*

"No, indeed," he said, kindly, "I have a most pleasant remembrance of that holiday at Barford. How jolly we all were, and now, is n't it sad to think that most likely my poor aunt and cousin will lose their pretty home. I am afraid the dear man can't pull through."

Here was another obstacle. How could she get on the subject of the book, and those marked passages, when Mr. Brent looked so sad, and was evidently absorbed by anxiety for his uncle?

Stephen Brent had turned away; he stood gazing out of the window. He was thinking.

"I wish this was over. Confound that child Peggy, what a time she is!"

Miss Gray was thinking too.

"If I miss this chance I shall, perhaps, never see him again."

"Do you never write to friends then?" She spoke timidly, but she gave him a glance that told him more than she thought it did.

"I hardly ever write letters"—he felt awkward and uncomfortable. "I don't like it, to begin with, and then I have not much time to spare, and I write a very bad letter too."

"I do not think so," she said. "Oh! Mr. Brent, I had hoped—I cannot tell you how I had hoped"—her face glowed, but she did not check her words; they poured out so vehemently that he stood listening, touched by her earnestness;—"my hope was, I know wild, presump-

tuous"; then, as he looked utterly amazed, she forced herself to be calm in an instant. "Do not mistake me; I hoped nothing from you except that you would answer my letters from time to time, and so form my untutored mind into your own noble ways of thought," she said, with a little laugh.

As she said the word, the door opened, and Peggy hurried in.

"Oh! Miss Gray," she said, crying, "you told me you would only keep me waiting five minutes while you spoke to Stephen, and I'm sure I ought to have started long ago. Oh! Steenie, how is my father? I have been waiting all this time for you to summon me. How could you delay?"

Stephen Brent could never feel sure whether he said good-bye to Miss Gray or not. He remembered hurrying Peggy into the cab which had been all this time waiting, and then his uncle's death had blotted out minor details in memory, only somehow he felt that he had had a narrow escape that day, and that he had been very hard and unsympathetic to that handsome friend of Peggy's.

Harriet Gray did not forget one word or one look; the sight of him rekindled her love, and as time wore on she hated her life more intensely than she had done at first.

She knew there was no chance of another visit to Barford; since the vicar's death, Mrs. Short and her daughter had *gone to stay* with friends, and one day Peggy wrote to Harriet Gray that perhaps she might be obliged

to go out into the world to earn a living, and that her cousin Stephen had sailed on a long voyage.

This took away all hope from Miss Gray ; she felt that that chapter of her life was closed, and she left Peggy's letter unanswered.

A few days after their meeting at the school, she had written a passionate, self-upbraiding letter to Stephen Brent, deploring the impulsive nature which had led her to forget the restraint her wretched position should have taught her. " I feel that you despise me, for I despise myself," she ended.

Almost by return of post came a note from Mr. Brent. A kind, manly note, in which he begged her not to be hard on herself, and assured her he would remember her as a kind friend, but he should forget any thing she did not wish remembered. " No word or look of mine," he said, " will remind you that we have ever met before, unless you wish it otherwise."

These last words stung her so deeply that she wrote to him very coldly in reply, and begged that, if they had the ill-fortune to meet again, they might meet as strangers, and so the episode had ended.

Harriet Gray went to stay the holidays with another pupil, the daughter of a rich farmer, a widower. While she was there, the girl sickened with fever and died, and the father was so touched by his visitor's personal charms, *and by her devotion to his child*, that a few weeks after *her return to the school* he wrote and asked her to be *his wife*.

CHAPTER II.

MR. AND MRS. LIMBER.

IT has been said that Mrs. Limber and her husband were sitting together after their early dinner. As a rule, Mr. Limber contemplated his wife through the smoke of his pipe with much content, for he was very proud of her beauty and of her cleverness ; she was, he considered, quite "a cut above" any woman he had ever seen. But to-day he was too angry even to admire his wife ; there was much bitterness in Mr. Limber's heart. That morning he had received a letter from Mr. Martin, the bachelor brother of his first wife, announcing his intention of leaving all he possessed to the orphan niece who lived with him. Mr. Martin said he thought it was fairer to tell his nephew Dick that he must not expect any thing more than a legacy from him.

"It's a d——d shame, my dear, to cut Dick out of his rights," Mr. Limber had said when he had read the letter, thumping the table with his great first ; "beg pardon, my dear, but Dick's Martin's own nephew as much as the girl is."

"Perhaps more than she is," Mrs. Limber quietly observed.

"Well, you know what I mean, my pet. I call it a confounded swindle. Why, he's got thousands to leave," said the farmer, blowing a tremendous "cloud."

This depressing news had been weighing on Mr. Lim-

ber all the morning, and consequently he had gone through his business in a very cross humor, finding fault with the men about the farm in an unnecessary and unusual fashion—in short, making himself generally disagreeable.

His dinner and pipe, which usually soothed him when he was ruffled—he was blessed with a first-rate digestion—had not mended matters at all to-day, for his slow wits, when roused to anger, took longer time to soothe than if they had been more nimble.

Now, as he sat smoking, he went back again to the subject.

“I call it a fraud, my dear, a great piece of injustice. God knows I don’t want to injure poor Elsie, or rob her in any way, but it ought to be share and share alike with her and Dick. Dick’s mother always thought it would be so. Think of what use the money would be in working the farm, and I might keep a horse for you, Harrie.”

Her eyes sparkled. She said quietly :

“I do not see why the money should not be all Dick’s. I should think it might be managed.”

“What do you mean, Harrie?” The farmer took his pipe from his mouth and stared at his wife.

“How foolish men are,” she gave a little hard laugh ;
“they make such a mouthing and moaning over things when they go contrary, instead of at once seeking out a remedy. Do you mean to say, Richard, that you can’t see what we must do to get all this money for Dick?”

The farmer smoked on in silence, carefully scratching behind his ear with the forefinger of his left hand ; then he said :

“ No, my pet ; no, I don’t.”

Mrs. Limber smiled, and looked superior.

“ Then I ’ll tell you. Ask Elsie here, and let Dick marry her.”

Mr. Limber’s eyes and mouth opened as if they had been pulled by a string ; then he broke into a hearty laugh.

“ Well, I ’m blessed, you are clever ; that ’s the best idea I ’ve heard for many a day. Give me a kiss, my pet ; you are—” He did not say what he thought she was, but his look expressed the most profound admiration.

He smoked vigorously for several minutes ; then he said:—

“ Harrie, you ’re a devilish clever woman. You shall manage it all, my dear. Write to Wortham at once. I ’ll talk to Dick about it.”

“ No, you must n’t say a word to Dick about our plan ; that would be just the way to set him against his cousin. Good gracious ! what a want of perception a man has ! Don’t you know young men always do the reverse of what you advise them to do ?”

“ Do they, my dear ? Well, it ’s more than likely.” Mr. Limber believed most implicitly in his wife’s knowledge of all things. “ I suppose when they get older they

get wiser? Why—why, cart-horses pulling contrary ways would n't have made me give you up, my pet."

Mrs. Limber smiled at this compliment, but this time her smile was hardly a smile of satisfaction.

"I shall write to Wortham this afternoon."

"Do, my pet." Mr. Limber got up, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "You've done me a deal of good, Harrie; but you always do," he added, giving her a sounding kiss. "I'll go and see after the men now. Manage it all your own way, for certain you'll carry it through all straight."

He left the room, and Mrs. Limber set herself to write her letter; but she sat for some time before the paper without writing a word. Varied thoughts crossed her expressive face; they all ended in a bitter look of disappointment. She sighed heavily.

"What an old lump he is! I was a hasty fool when I married."

The letter once begun was soon finished. She was signing her name when the door opened, and her stepson lounged into the room.

He was very tall, and, like his father, was broadly built. There was, too, a strong likeness to his father in his handsome face, only the son was fair and blue-eyed, and his features were cast in a softer mould; there were weakness and indecision about the mouth and brows. He did not look more than twenty, though he was two or three *years older.*

At the sight of him a pleased expression came into Mrs. Limber's face ; she and her step-son were excellent friends. She had liked the young fellow as soon as she saw him, and he had been equally pleased by his handsome step-mother elect. It was not difficult for her to strengthen her fascination of look by her fascination of manner ; she took pains to be kind to young Dick, and he quickly became her slave.

"Well, Dick, I 'm glad you 've come. I wanted to see you," Mrs. Limber said ; "guess what I have been doing."

The young man threw himself into an arm-chair, and stretched out his long legs.

"Could n't to save my life."

"I 've been writing to your uncle Martin to ask him to let your cousin Elsie spend a few weeks here."

"Oh ! bother, don't have her here, she 'll be awfully in the way. Why should she come ?"

"Dick, how can you be so rude to her ; and so unkind to me ? I thought you would have been glad for me to have a little change in her society."

"Oh, yes, to be sure, so I am. I did n't think of that"—he looked rather disturbed. "All right, have her here by all means ; only please don't expect me to amuse her ; you know I hate girls."

"You dreadful boy ! I don't suppose she will trouble her head about you. Your father thinks we ought to be kind to her. You must remember, Dick, she is an orphan."

"Well, if she's a 'fatherless' girl, at any rate she's not 'desolate and oppressed,'" said Dick, profanely, with a grin.

Whereupon Mrs. Limber said :

"Oh, fie ! Dick," and put her letter into an envelope.

CHAPTER III.

ELSIE AND HER UNCLE.

WORTHAM is a busy, thriving, and somewhat matter-of-fact town, chiefly noticeable for its abundance of red-brick houses. Once it was quaint with narrow streets and dirty, picturesque courts, often with an old tree in the midst of these ; but civilization and sanitary reform have obliterated or hidden all such "nuisances," and the streets are broad, straight, uninteresting, and well kept, while most of the well-to-do shops have huge squares of glass in their long windows instead of the small panes or lattices of former days. Still here and there one lights on an old-fashioned house, and one of them is nestled closely under the chess-board patterned tower of the old parish church.

The old house is red, of course, but except for the stacks of chimneys rising from the slated roofs you see little of its walls ; the glossy leaves of a huge magnolia on one side the porch, and a closely clinging pyrocanthus on the other, completely cover the front, to say

nothing of the stiff laurel hedge set on top of a low wall that shuts in both house and a tiny strip of garden from the road. Three spotless stone steps lead up to the green door whereon shines a brass knocker as old as the house itself, and the hall into which the green door opens may have been used as a summer parlor in the days of Queen Anne. There are seats along its walls, and an octagon table in the midst of it. A glorious nosegay of laburnum blossoms stands on this, looking out of a gray and blue jug with a sort of graceful consciousness that it is the gem of this cosy-looking entrance hall. Round the dark red walls, with white painted panelling half way up, are engravings; Mr. Martin, the chief solicitor of Wortham, has many people besides clients who come to ask advice, and he says he likes people to have something pleasant to look at while they wait for admittance into his office. A door leads into this on the left-hand side of the fireplace.

But the green entrance door is on the right hand of the two long, old-fashioned windows which light this pleasant nook, with its carpeted floor and book and paper strewn table, and just opposite a baize swing-door leads to a passage, or rather a second hall, with a staircase on the left, and doors on the right and before us. Within, the door in front is a pleasanter resting-place than the old hall—a small, low room, full of books, and looking into *a quaint, prim garden, gay with spring flowers.* The low windows have a cushioned seat in each, and in one *them a girl sits reading.*

She is in harmony with the room, and yet she makes a fresh and striking contrast to its tarnished gilding and the faded leather of the chairs and sofa. Her dark blue eyes are liquid with fresh, young life, and her fair, clear skin and shining hair are all full of the beauty of youth, but the harmony lies in her expression. Elsie Neale's face is full of serene repose, of that delightful leisure which it refreshes one even to think of in these days of high-pressure living. And yet there is a sensitiveness in the thin, well-developed nostrils and the slightly irregular mouth, the full lips of which are parted as she bends her lovely white neck with earnest interest over the book resting on the window-sill. There is a pensive sweetness in her eyes just now, but not a trace of sorrow or of care on the girl's cream-white forehead. Elsie has always been so happy. Both her parents died when she was a child, and she has ever since been the cherished darling of her uncle Edward.

Mrs. Castles, the stiff old housekeeper, has a way of tossing her head and hinting that "bachelor gentlemen do spoil young ladies, to be sure"; but, even when she is stiffest and crossest, she never can withstand Elsie's loving ways, though after she has yielded she has a habit of telling herself she is "a far gone old fool."

The door opens, and in comes Elsie's uncle. A man who has no charm of face, but whose square head and *sagacious eyes* give his clients at first sight a full belief in *his power to advise them*. Mr. Martin is full of sound,

practical common-sense, without the narrow view of the imaginative side of life usually attendant on such qualities ; but then Mr. Martin is a man with more than one side to his character. He has found time in his life to store his head not only with the contents of law-books, but of other books besides. He does not keep his well-stocked library for show only.

Elsie jumps up ; she dearly loves her uncle ; there is no one like him, she thinks.

He is one of those men whose companionship is like a never-ending tract of new country, or the pages of some newly written book. He is neither silent nor demonstrative, but Elsie is always discovering that Uncle Edward has some fresh store of thoughts, till now unshared by her, or that he dismisses her with some new idea to take away and ponder. Rarely has any girl of nineteen been so privileged in a companion and guardian as Elsie Neale is in her uncle. To-day she sees that he has some pleasure in store for her. There is a mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he comes in with a letter in his hand.

"Look here, Elsie ; I wonder what you will say to this. Here is an invitation for you from the Limbers at Hill-side."

Elsie smiles, but she looks shy.

"Oh ! but, uncle, I do not know them. Of course, I know Uncle Limber a little, but I have not seen Dick since *he was twelve* ; and I don't know the new aunt at *all*."

"Well, never mind that"—he stroked her hair affectionately. "She is evidently ready to like you. She has written most kindly—in fact, child, I don't see how you can get out of the visit."

Elsie pouted a little. She had just got a new girl-friend, and, as she had never been to school, she had seen little of girls of her own age. This was her first friendship, and it was in the full glow of freshness; she did not want a break in it, so she wreathed her arm round her uncle's neck and diplomatized.

"You cannot spare me, uncle; you know you will get moped to death if I go away."

He pinched her soft cheek.

"You vain puss! I am going to be too busy even to think of you; you will be well out of the way. There, read the letter, and see if it does n't tempt you."

It was certainly a very nice letter. Mrs. Limber said she had heard so much of Elsie from her husband that she longed to make her acquaintance, and she begged that Mr. Martin would bring his niece to Hillside, that she might have the pleasure of also seeing one for whom she already felt such deep reverence and esteem.

Elsie smiled as she folded up the letter.

"I like her for that," she said; "it is nice of the new wife to want to know you, uncle, because one could excuse her if she felt a little jealous of dear aunt's memory. *But I thought you objected to this marriage?*"

Mr. Martin looked a little embarrassed.

"Well, ~~my~~ dear, never mind any thing I may have said, I may have spoken hastily ; probably I was prejudiced. Perhaps I thought Dick ought to have taken a young wife instead of his father. The best way is to go and judge for yourself. Mrs. Limber says Thursday, I think. Can you be ready so soon ?"

Elsie felt fluttered ; this was the first time she had been asked to stay from home for more than a day or two at a time.

"I think so," she said, " but I must talk to Mrs. Castles. But you will go with me, uncle ? "

"Impossible, my child. What would my clients say ? And you know Mr. Gordon is coming in a few days."

"I wish I could take Peggy Short with me, uncle. What fun we would have ! "

"Yes, poor little girl ! it would do her good. Well, you must interest Mrs. Limber about her when you go to Hillside, and she will be able to go with you on another occasion. Let me know before post-time whether you can go on Thursday, Elsie."

When her uncle left her, Elsie decided that Peggy Short would be a better adviser in regard to her wardrobe than Mrs. Castles would, and would tell her whether there was any need to buy a new gown for Hillside.

She soon reached the little cottage outside the town which Mrs. Short had rented since she came to Wortham.

Elsie had never seen Barford Vicarage, but she felt that *Mrs. Short and Peggy* had been used to something better

than the little meagre, six-roomed house, and that the uncouth, rough-headed girl who opened the door was not a fit servant for them.

But neither mother nor daughter ever grumbled, and they had made their little sitting-rooms so pretty with the trifles that had accumulated during happier years that Elsie thought how much more really home-like it all was than the smart drawing-rooms of the banker's wife freshly decked by the chief upholsterer of Wortham.

Peggy was sitting alone sewing at some calico. She flung it down when she saw Elsie, and the two girls rushed at one another and kissed.

"I am so glad to see you, dear," Peggy said. "You are just like a sunbeam coming across a stormy sky."

At this Elsie kissed her again, and they sat a few minutes in silence.

"What a waste of friendship it seems," Elsie said, "to think you have been living here all this while and we might have been knowing one another."

"Ah, but we might have quarrelled perhaps," said Peggy, mischievously.

"Nonsense! Now you have got to sit still and listen," and Elsie related the story of her invitation, and asked the advice she needed. Peggy laughed, and said she was sure Elsie had all that was necessary for a farm-house visit.

"Who do you say the people are you are going to stay with?" said Peggy.

"He is my uncle, Mr. Limber—but only my uncle by marriage ; my aunt was an invalid for years before she died, and I have never seen my cousin Dick since I was a child."

"I had a school-fellow called Limber," said Peggy ; and then she added, uncomfortably, "but I do not think she could have been your cousin."

Elsie shook her head.

"I know what you mean. Yes, she was my cousin—at least my cousin was at a London school till she died ; but poor Aunt Sophy married beneath her, and the children took after the father, I believe. I have always fancied that was why my uncle kept us apart. But I like what I have seen of Uncle Limber ; he is so kind and so good-natured. He has married again lately a young wife."

Peggy had heard of Miss Gray's marriage, and she had nearly said, "He married a friend of mine," but she checked herself ; both she and her mother had keenly felt Mrs. Limber's utter neglect, for she had not even written to tell them of her marriage.

"I shall not be long away," Elsie said, as she kissed her friend, "but I mean to take a store of books with me in case I should be dull."

"Books !" Peggy's nose was more *retroussé* than ever. "Fancy taking books to a breezy sea-side farm-house ! Why, you will be out all day long, and I am sure, if that cousin Dick of yours is worth any thing, he will give you

"no chance of being dull—at least," she was rather alarmed at her own freedom, and her bright face grew rosier, "I mean I never have any time to myself when Steenie comes Oh, Elsie, I do so long for you to see him ! "

"I might like him more than you approve, or I might not care for him, and then you would be vexed ; it is safer as it is."

Peggy looked up quickly to see if this was joke or earnest, but Elsie was serious. Peggy took her two hands and pressed them to her own.

"I suppose I ought not to say it, but then I have always said what I ought not ever since I could speak ; but, oh ! Elsie, I should so love to have you for a cousin, and instead you will perhaps fall in love with this tiresome cousin Dick——"

"Naughty child !—how do you know he is tiresome ?" Elsie kissed her. "I am not going to think of falling in love, as you call it, for years to come ; it would be treason to Uncle Edward—he could n't spare me."

She laughed and nodded, and Peggy stood at the little gate and watched her till a turn in the road hid her tall, pliant figure.

"What a sweet creature she is !" the girl thought, "and so unconscious of her own charms and graces ; she is lovely. I never saw such a smile, and how good of her to be so fond of stupid old me"

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. CASTLES.

WHILE Elsie sat chatting with Peggy Short, Mr. Martin was having an interview with his house-keeper and Elsie's duenna Mrs Castles.

"Then you expect this gentleman the day after Miss Elsie goes, sir ?

She had to wait some time after she spoke, for Mr. Martin was noting down some memoranda.

At last he looked up.

"Yes, you can put him in the blue room ; he will stay here till he finds comfortable lodgings in the town."

Mrs. Castles breathed more freely.

"He 's not going to live here then, sir ?"

Mr. Martin laughed.

"No, no, of course not. Why, Castles, you ought to know better ; how could I have him here with a pretty young lady like Miss Elsie ?—he would be making love to her instead of doing my work. Make the room as comfortable as you can, and I 'll write to Mr. Gordon to come on Friday. That will do, Castles."

His head was bent over his desk again, and Mrs. Castles retreated. By the time she reached her own room, her face was almost as yellow as the bows in her cap, and the lines round her mouth were grim.

"Just like *old bachelors*," she said ; "I grant you my *master is genteel to a fault*, but he judges other people

by himself. Out of the frying-pan into the fire is nothing to what he 's doing now ; because he 's afraid that this young lawyer will fall in love with Miss Neale, he packs her off to Hillside, and she 'll perhaps take a fancy to that Dick Limber ; it 'll be just the story of Miss Sophy over again. I wonder he ain't had enough of one low marriage, and he so genteel. My mercy, there 's no accounting for the vagaries of gentlefolks."

Mrs. Castles had been housekeeper when Mr. Martin had his two pretty sisters living with him ; one of them, Elsie's mother, had married Captain Neale ; but the other, a silly, sentimental girl, had taken a sudden liking for a handsome young farmer whom she saw for the first time in the market-place of Wortham. Young Limber picked up her pocket-handkerchief and gave it to her, and a neighbor of Mr. Martin's, seeing the little incident, introduced the young people. The meeting led to another next market-day, but Sophy Martin understood her brother's prejudices too well to tell him of her new acquaintance. Her sister Janet was in India with her husband, and the foolish girl went on delighting in the concealment, which in her eyes gave a romance to her meetings with her handsome lover. At last the acquaintance came to Mr. Martin's ears. He tried at first to break off the entanglement, but his sister, though weak, was obstinate, and as he found that the farmer was a good *sort of fellow*, likely to be well off and really attached to *her*, he gave his consent, not without warning his sister

that she had put a barrier between herself and her people.

Poor Sophy repented bitterly before she had been married six months. Her husband was kind and affectionate, but her complaints wearied him, and he left her much alone, and after the birth of her two children she sank into a state of chronic invalidism—cheered now and then by her brother's rare visits. She died while her niece Elsie was still young, and after his sister's death Mr. Martin had not cared to let the girl go to Hillside. Now that there was a new mistress there, he thought the change and the fresh air might be of service to her; he thought too that Elsie was old enough and wise enough to be trusted to judge for herself, and he considered Dick Limber a mere boy.

Mr. Martin had just undertaken the management of some very difficult business, and he had engaged the services of a young solicitor to help him therein, but it was not till he received Mrs. Limber's letter that he decided to ask Mr. Gordon to become an inmate of his house for a time.

He had no fear of Elsie and her cousin Dick—his keen insight told him that the girl was of an altogether different stamp from his lovely, silly sister Sophy—but it seemed to him hardly fair on Mr. Gordon to have him in the same house with such an attractive girl as his niece, and then to expect his undivided attention to difficult work—*this was what Mr. Martin told himself.* Perhaps

an unconfessed wish to keep Elsie as she was, as long as he possibly could, lay at the bottom of the gray-headed lawyer's speculations.

It had soothed Mrs. Castles to hear that the new-comer—"the assistant," as she called him to herself—was not going to be a permanent inmate. It seemed to her that this would be almost like having a lodger, and a lodger would have been contrary to her idea of her master's "perfect gentility."

More than once, the first Mrs. Limber had asked this housekeeper to come to her at Hillside ; but Mrs. Castles had always found an excuse for refusal.

"If Miss Sophy forgot her gentility," she said, "and took up with a mere farmer, it don't follow that I am to forget mine—"

And when Elsie asked questions about the aunt and cousins she so rarely saw, Mrs. Castles always firmly pursed her thin lips and told her : "The least said about them the better ; she didn't wish to lay the blame on any one, but there had been an error—somewhere."

CHAPTER V.

NEW YORK. SCHEMING.

MRS. LIMBER crossed the kitchen, out of which an oak staircase led to the bedroom gallery.

This kitchen, as it was called, was never used for cooking, and until the farmer's second marriage it had been

the house-place or living-room of the family. Poor Sophy had simply fretted at such rough ways, and had rejoiced when the doctor declared it too draughty for her—after that she had lived chiefly in her own room. But the new wife, before her marriage, had told the enamored farmer that she could not see the use of living in a room with a bacon-rack across the ceiling and a staircase leading into it at one end, while, beside this, a door opened straight into the chicken-yard.

“It is like living out-of-doors,” she said, “while all the time you have both a comfortable dining-room and drawing-room done up in brown holland—”

“Dining-room and drawing-room !” The new-fangled words scattered Mr. Limber’s wits ; he had not been used to call his two parlors by such fine names. One was the best parlor and the other the sitting-room ; the first used only on such a great occasion as a christening feast, the other when the parson or the squire and his lady paid one of their rare visits. The simple farmer felt inclined to resist the proposed change, but he saw a certain light in his Harriet’s eyes which he had already learned to comprehend, and, on the understanding that he might smoke his daily afternoon pipe in the parlor beside her, he gave his consent to the change.

Harriet’s beauty had at first attracted him, but her cleverness made him her slave ; and when he saw the transformation which her quick wits and deft fingers effected *in the house*, her influence increased.

What a lucky fellow he was to have secured such a treasure! such a style about her, too! why, she had brushed Dick up already.

But Mrs. Limber was not nearly so contented. It seemed to her that, try as she would to brighten up this gloomy old place, it remained dowdy and tasteless. To-day it all looked worse than ever, and she sighed, as she went along, at the darkness of the bedroom gallery. It was panelled in carved oak, so that she could not dare to suggest that it should be papered. She opened the door of a good-sized room with huge beams across the ceiling. It was very dark, in spite of the sunshine that came in through its small latticed windows; the walls, like those of the gallery, were oak-panelled.

Mrs. Limber looked round her with a shiver of disgust; she thought of all she had heard of Miss Neale's charming home at Wortham, and she wondered what the girl would think of such a dull old place as Hillside.

"If I shrink from it, what will she feel, I wonder?" She stood thinking, and then shrugged her shoulders with impatience. "She will go away again in disgust, and I shall have had all my trouble for nothing. But I will smarten up this room a little." She thought of what Elsie's money might do when it became Dick's—Dick who she knew was devoted to her and would spend it exactly as she pleased. Besides, if Dick married a rich wife, there would be no need for his father to divide his leavings, they ought all *to come to Mrs. Limber.* "It will be my own fault if I

don't manage this girl as well as Dick ; I have always been able to manage people all my life long." .

Conscience pricked her as two or three notable exceptions recalled themselves ; still it seemed to her that Hill-side was big enough to hold a young Mr. and Mrs. Limber, and that she must make some sacrifice to attain the position she wished.

Sacrifice ! Her face darkened. Was it not sacrifice enough to be tied to her fond, lumbering dolt of a husband ? Her quick wits had already told her that she could not hope to remodel him, but she could and she would transform the house and raise herself into equality with Mrs. Roberts at the Rectory and Mrs. Collingwood at the Hall.

"Equality !" she laughed, and looked at herself in the glass ; there was certainly a style in the make of her dark cloth gown, with its plain linen collar and cuffs, which showed her fine figure off, that poor dowdy Mrs. Roberts might have tried after for ever.

"No, no," she said ; "I will take care that Elsie Neale is happy here, and I must drill Dick into good behavior ; it does not do to leave these things to chance. After all, why should not the girl be happy ? There is a fine sea and beautiful air, and she need have no trouble to worry her."

Trouble at that moment represented to Mrs. Limber the endurance of Mr. Limber as a husband. When she remembered Stephen Brent, it seemed to her that she *must have been mad to marry the farmer.*

Her neglect in telling Mrs. Short of her engagement had not been all worldliness ; at first, hope had lingered, even after she had promised to marry the farmer ; she clung to the belief that something might bring her and the sailor together again ; but Mr. Limber had pressed on the marriage, and then she had shrunk from telling Peggy what a descent she had made in marrying a farmer. Wounded by her silence, Peggy left off writing to her, and Mrs. Limber was ignorant of Mrs. Short's present abode.

She now sat down in one of the black chairs and calculated the chances before her.

"If Elsie marries Dick, and we get on well, I can do as I please,—I shall have a pony carriage and a maid for myself ; if Elsie dies, Dick will have all the money, and then he need n't marry at all, nor will he want any money from his father. The thing to prevent by every possible means is the chance of Elsie marrying some one else—"

She rose up and smoothed her shining dark hair before the glass.

"What a fool that old Martin is ! If he had divided his money, all this trouble would have been saved—and he ought to do it ; for of course Elsie has her mother's money just as Dick has—Elsie did n't want any more. If I had had two hundred a year, just see what I'd have done with it. Never mind. Now I must see about pink calico and *ribbon, and muslin* for tables and looking-glasses—I'll so *change the place* that the girl can't say it looks dull."

CHAPTER VI.

ELSIE AT HILLSIDE.

AT the end of the formal garden at Hillside, on the farther side from the farm-yard, there is a summer-house ; a tall stiff yew-hedge goes round the garden, but on one side of the summer-house an opening has been cut in the thick living green wall, giving a view of the vast sea-line that stretches as far as the eye can reach on either side of the outlying point on which the flag-staff stands.

Mrs. Limber has been standing in the summer-house for a quarter of an hour, gazing in the direction of the flag-staff ; now she comes into the garden to open the gate in the yew-hedge, and looks out. She puts her hand over her eyes, but she cannot from that distance see what is happening on the point. There is no one in the high road, no one in the lane beside the turnip-field.

At last she turns away with a contented smile.

"They have not stayed out so long before ; it is a good sign. I do hope Dick is exerting himself to please his cousin ; but he is a shocking lout, he misses the chances any other man would snatch at. Perhaps his handsome face will win her ; she has plenty to say herself, so she won't mind a silent admirer. Any one but Dick would have fallen head over ears in love with the girl," she adds, contemptuously.

Elsie and Richard Limber have been strolling and sitting near the sea ever since breakfast. It is a glorious

morning, and the green waves come rolling along the shingle flinging a creamy foam before them, which, as they retreat, melts into the long wreaths of green-brown weed the waves have worked so hard to bring in. The sea comes nearer and nearer to the feet of the cousins ; the seaweed bank, which never leaves the foot of the steep chalky headland, is very wet and slippery with the far-flung foam and Elsie is glad to take Dick's arm so as to walk in safety.

"Let us go up," she says ; "this water will reach the cliffs directly."

Dick Limber stands still and looks round deliberately.

"No," he says, slowly, "not for five minutes ; but I can show you a pretty sight, Elsie, it was not so near high tide when we came here before. Come along, I'll take care of you."

He went on first, holding his cousin's hand as she walked behind him, till he came to a lofty opening in the cliff shaped like a lancet arch. Beyond this a steeply ascending road had been excavated through the chalk cliff itself to the green down that crowned it. Dick drew his cousin through this opening, and when they had climbed a little way he bade her look back. It was a striking picture—the almost perfect arch tapestried on this side with all kinds of clinging, trailing plants, tufts of grass and fern among the broken chalk and gravel, and beyond, a *ribbony* ~~endless~~ *expansive* expanse of sea, on which some huge three-*change* ~~os~~ looked mere specks upon the horizon.

Dick withdrew his eyes slowly from the view and fixed them on Elsie. The young fellow's soul still lay slumbering in a chrysalis-like state as regarded women, but he had ever since his childhood loved Hillside and the view from the point—one belonged to the other ; in fact, Dick's confession of secular faith, if he had been asked for it, would have been to the effect that England was the one country of this world fit to belong to ; the town of Blackwater the best town of England ; and the farm of Hillside, about three miles from Blackwater, the dwelling-place most to be coveted. Dick loved the old house in which he had been born, and the horses and cows, the bullocks and pigs ; he loved the fields too ; and, though he had little industry, he liked to watch the crops—the tender wheat blades piercing the brown earth, or the emerald green of the turnips, and the purple of the beet-fields. He would saunter about all day with his hands in his pockets, his big handsome blue eyes gazing over the sea—just thinking of nothing. He thought Elsie “a very jolly girl,” because she humored his silent fits and did not tease him as Mrs. Limber often did ; but as yet, at any rate, it had not occurred to Mr. Richard Limber that his cousin was specially interesting to him, or that she was more charming than any one he had ever seen.

Elsie stood gazing. “It is beautiful,” she said, turning to follow her *cousin* up the hill ; “you seem to *admire Nature so much*, Richard, I wonder you don't learn *to draw*. *You don't seem to have much to do.*”

Dick hesitated—then :

“No, thank you ; I could n’t draw all as I see it here. I should only lose my temper and waste my time and my paper.”

The girl laughed, but so gayly that he could not feel cross.

“But, Richard, you have nothing really to do, have you ? I expect the farm does as well without you as with you—don’t you feel the want of an occupation ?”

He flushed and looked uneasy.

“Now, that ’s just like Mrs. Limber, she ’s always chaffing me about being idle ; but, unless father gives me some definite charge, I don’t see what I can do.”

“I should ask him for some work,” Elsie said ; “you have asked him, perhaps ?”

Her cousin looked sheepish.

“Well, no. I think it ought to come from him ; If I ask him, he ’ll as likely as not give me more than I care to look after.”

Elsie walked on in silence. She was so accustomed to her uncle Edward’s habits of regular incessant work—for often she left him writing when she went to bed, and she knew that he went into his office before breakfast—it seemed to her that Dick was unmanly and unworthy to waste his life in sauntering about and admiring Nature.

Dick had grown so accustomed to her cheerful, animating talk that after awhile he noticed her silence.

“I s---” he said, kindly ; “don’t
~~understand~~”

your little head about me. I get on first-rate, you know, and it's not half so dull since Mrs. Limber came ; and—you're awfully jolly, you know."

He stood still ; he had not been looking at Elsie while he spoke, but straight before him. They had been following a narrow path which wound like a white ribbon across the green downs from where it descended to the rock archway to the broad high-road near Hillside.

"Look at Hillside now," he said ; "this is the best view of it."

And truly the farmstead looked better from this point than it did on nearer approach. The quaint old gables, with the tiled roof and red chimney stacks, showed out picturesquely among the surrounding trees, and the stiff yew-hedge was quite in keeping with the rest.

"Yes, it looks very cosy nestling under the hill," said Elsie ; "the only thing I don't like is the garden ; could you not take in some of the turnip-field ? it is such a narrow strip as it is, you have scarcely room for flowers, and the yew-hedge does n't suit them " she added with a pretty little look of wisdom.

Dick shook his head and laughed.

"I see you're just like Mrs. Limber. I suppose all women are alike—young ones, I mean,—they all want change. Now old ones don't ; our cook, old Olive, she often grumbles to me about the changes. I have a great deal to do with Mrs. Limber, that she alone."

This was a long speech for Dick. Elsie laughed.

"How can there be beauty without variety, and does n't variety mean change? Why, if there were only men in the world, the poor world would stand still, and they themselves would at last die of dulness."

"I know one thing," he said, sulkily, "girls were made to tease."

"Of course they were; don't you suppose Eve teased Adam after they left Paradise! Ah, Richard, I have convicted you out of your own mouth! Did n't you say just now that Hillside had been less dull since your step-mother came, that is because before you had no one to tease you. Friction is good for the skin, and unless a man gets his proper share of teasing, his wits get dull and thickened. You don't know how much good I've done you already."

"That's your opinion, is it, miss?" but he felt too awkward to go on with the discussion. It was a relief to see some one standing at the side gate in the hedge.

"By Jove, there's Mrs. Limber," he said. "she's waiting for us. What's up now?"

Mrs. Limber looked from one face to the other as they came up to the gate.

"Runaways!" she said; and then, as she looked again from one face to the other, her smile died away. Both Dick and his cousin were calm and wholly undisturbed by her searching glances.

"What's the matter?" Dick said; "we're not late: *is n't dinner-time yet.*"

"What a happy-go-lucky fellow you are," his step-mother patted his shoulder ; "it wants an hour to dinner-time yet ; but Elsie is going to advise me where to plant my clematis, and I have been waiting for her."

She had only just thought of the clematis ; in reality she had grown so impatient of the simple cousinly relations between her step-son and Elsie that she would not believe they could continue ; their long absence this morning had excited her hopes, and now in her disappointment she would willingly have called Dick a fool to his face.

Mr. Limber doted on Elsie already, and he was delighted when his wife promised him that she would soon be his daughter-in-law. It made Mrs. Limber angry to see that matters had evidently not progressed this morning.

Dick avoided as much as he could talking to Elsie before his step-mother. She had not spoken out her intentions, but she had more than once hinted that he was not polite to his cousin, and that a girl used to town ways expected a good deal of attention. He resolved not to give Mrs. Limber a chance of teasing him now.

"Well," he said, "I shall leave you two to see about your plants and go and find father," and he went.

"He might offer to help us."

Mrs. Limber looked at Elsie.

"Oh, no, never mind," the girl said ; "it would be too much trouble to *him*. Dick hates trouble, I know."

"Poor fellow ! he has been spoiled ; but he 's very good and kind, and I think very clever," said Mrs. Limber, confidently. "I sometimes think he is wasted here. I often tell him it would be good for him to be under Mr. Martin for a time."

Elsie smiled. She knew there would be little sympathy between unready, untidy, idle Dick and her precise, fastidious, hard-working uncle ; but still she thought Mr. Martin's advice might be useful to her cousin.

"He must come to Wortham when I go back," she said. "I shall ask uncle to send him an invitation."

Mrs. Limber's hope revived. Perhaps when Elsie saw the young fellow away from his father and his home, he might appear to more advantage. She resolved it should not be her fault if Dick ~~did~~ not pay a long visit to Wortham.

CHAPTER VII.

ELSIE MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

ELSIE NEALE came home at the end of a fortnight. Mr. Limber had urged her to pay a longer visit, but his wife did not second his invitation.

"Absence may do more for Dick," she thought ; "she will very likely miss him and wish for him when she goes back, and if she takes to him, I consider the matter as good as settled ; Dick can never stand out against us both."

And if she could have read Elsie's thoughts on the way home, Mrs. Limber would have been contented. The girl thought much about Dick Limber and his lonely life, and of the advantage it would be to him to see more of his uncle Edward. He would draw Dick out.

"Uncle Limber is kind and good, but the poor fellow cannot gain much from him except mere farm knowledge."

She was travelling alone, and she wondered whether bright, pretty Mrs. Limber did not sometimes find her husband very dull. Elsie was not uncharitable, but she could not help also wondering whether her new aunt had married for love.

When she reached the old red house, Mrs. Castles greeted her with a message from her uncle; sudden business had taken him to London, he would not be at home till evening.

"Tea is ready, Miss Neale," said the housekeeper, "and if you will give me your keys, I will take out your things myself."

Elsie felt disappointed; she had come home in a glow of happy feeling, excited at the prospect of seeing her uncle and of chatting with him over the events of her visit to Hillside.

Mrs. Castles followed her into the library and poured out a cup of tea, and then stood in the hope of hearing some news of the farm.

"I hope you have enjoyed your visit, Miss Neale?" She was as formal as if Elsie had been a stranger.

"Yes, thank you—they were all so kind ; but, Mrs. Castles"—she hastily drank her tea, she felt too unsettled to wait quietly at home through the hours that must elapse before her uncle's return,—I am going to see Miss Short. I shall be back long before uncle comes home."

This was in reply to the raised eyebrows and pursed-up lips which she knew meant disapproval.

Elsie knew that she should find her friend Peggy alone. At this time Mrs. Short would be reading to a blind widow who lived next door.

There was a little gate beside the house leading into the long narrow garden behind it, and Elsie often went in this way in summer-time, and then up some steps which led from the garden into the parlors, as Mrs. Short called her rooms.

There was a large folding Chinese screen, across these parlors, and when Elsie reached the top of the steps she saw that Peggy was not in the room nearest the garden. Unwilling to startle her friend, she paused before she came to the screen.

"Here I am, you see," she called out. "Come back to tease you again."

She did not wait for Peggy's answer, but pushed the screen aside.

Peggy was not there, but in the chair she usually sat in was a gentleman with a bronzed face and curly hair. Just now his dark gray eyes were full of amusement at Elsie's discomfiture, but he rose and bowed politely.

"I—I—" Elsie blushed and stammered. "I beg your pardon, I thought Peggy was here."

"My cousin was here a moment or two ago. Won't you sit down and wait for her? She has gone in next door to tell my aunt that I have arrived."

Elsie had already recovered herself. Her quick wits told her this was the sailor cousin whom she half disliked, because Peggy would always praise him.

"You are Mr. Brent, I think?" She smiled at him. "You are a great favorite with Peggy—she is never tired of singing your praises," she added, mischievously.

Stephen Brent could not take his eyes from her face. Her vivid blush had given her the color she sometimes wanted, and her eyes sparkled with amusement. The sailor told himself she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen, but her last words made him feel foolish.

"Peggy is a little goose," he said; "the fact is I have always been a sort of elder brother to the dear little girl—she has never had a brother of her own,—and I believe she takes me a good deal on trust; we don't see each other often now."

"You have been away from England for some time, have you not?"

"Just a year, and I shall not be ashore long; so I want to spend as much time as I can with my aunt and Peggy."

"How frank and outspoken he is," the girl thought.

And the man—

"I feel as if I could trust this girl, she looks so noble and so true."

Meantime there had come a pause in the conversation. Elsie felt inclined to laugh when she thought of her sudden unceremonious appearance. Stephen Brent was quite contented to sit gazing at the charming apparition.

Presently she said :

"Is this your first visit to Wortham since you came home?"

"I came a week ago, but I had to go back to town again almost directly. Now I hope to stay a week or two. I fancy," he smiled, "that I too have heard of you. I think you are the Miss Elsie Neale Peggy has written to me about."

"Yes. I am very fond of your cousin," said Elsie. "I never knew her till she came to Wortham a few months ago, and now we meet almost every day."

"I am sure it is a great boon for Peggy—to have—to have you for a friend."

Elsie looked pleased.

"It is a great delight to me to know Peggy. I have very few acquaintances of my own age, for I have never been to school."

"That is something to be thankful for," said Stephen, impulsively, and then he stopped.

Elsie was amused.

"My uncle dislikes schools, and yet Peggy is a very good specimen of a school-girl."

"She was only at school a year, and she was sixteen before she went ; but I was glad to hear she was not to

go back after her father's death. I think home is the safest place for a girl."

Elsie wondered at the difference between her cousin Dick and Mr. Brent ; she did not think there was a very great difference of age, but it was plain that the one man had thought about life and had formed his opinions thereon ; while poor lazy Dick was willing to take every thing in a haphazard way to save trouble.

"I wonder if he ever thought out a thought in his life ?" and then Elsie reproached herself for being ungrateful to her cousin Dick.

"Here comes Peggy," said Stephen Brent, who sat near the window, and in a moment Peggy came in ; her rosy cheeks grew rosier when she saw the wish of her heart fulfilled ; her cousin and her friend had actually made acquaintance with one another.

She flew at Elsie and kissed her. "How did you like Hillside ?" she said, and then the naughty girl added, quite regardless of Stephen's presence, "do tell me about Cousin Dick ; is he handsome ?"

Stephen had moved a little farther off to speak to Mrs. Short who had followed Peggy, but he could not help listening to the talk between the girls, and he watched Elsie's face as she answered, demurely :

"He is six feet high, and very handsome."

"Delightful. I felt sure of it. I am so glad," said Peggy, "he suits his name ; Dick Limber is a capital name for a big man. When is he coming to see you, Elsie ?"

"I believe he is coming soon," but Elsie did not smile ; she felt a little shy before this stranger, for she saw that Stephen could hear what was said. As for Stephen, he began to hate Dick Limber from that moment.

"And Mrs. Limber ? What is she like ?"

"She is very good-looking."

If Stephen Brent had not been present, Peggy meant to tell Elsie of her former acquaintance with her new aunt ; but one or two little things, especially the meeting at the school, and the look on Miss Gray's face when Peggy had interrupted that interview, also some hints from her mother, assured her that she would do well never to speak of Harriet to her cousin Stephen.

"Tell me, dear, how did you get on with your new aunt ?" Peggy was fondling Elsie's hand between both hers.

"She is very kind and pleasant."

Peggy opened her round eyes and screwed up her mouth.

"I know what that means. You do not like her, and she is a cruel step-mother to that dear Dick ; how sad it is those tall handsome fellows are always helpless and persecuted."

Elsie laughed.

"How can you talk such nonsense ? You are wrong, for my cousin is very fond of her. But Hillside is a delightful place, Peggy. We have been living out-of-doors by the sea ; at least Richard and I have, and next time I *go I want you to go with me.*"

"I should like it immensely, only whatever would mother do without me. However, we will see when the time comes ; you know my motto—'Be careful for nothing.' How I should tease Dick,"—she shook her head saucily. "I 'm afraid he 'd hate me."

And Peggy rattled on in wild spirits, she was so delighted to see her old friend again ; when Elsie soon after departed, she turned eagerly to Stephen.

"Well, what do you think of her ? Is she not the prettiest creature you ever saw ?"

"No. I do not consider her pretty——"

"Stephen, you are a monster ! What is the matter with your eyes ? I don't believe you can see out of them."

"It would punish you if I said no more. In your impatience you stopped me before I finished."

"Men are so slow," said Peggy, in mock disdain. "Come, now for the end of the sentence."

"Peggy, my dear," remonstrated her mother.

Stephen smiled at Mrs. Short.

"I see she is as saucy as ever, aunt ; we have somehow spoiled her between us."

Peggy tossed her head.

"What is Elsie if she is not pretty, I wonder ?"

"I think she is nearer being beautiful than pretty," he said, thoughtfully, "and yet she is not beautiful——"

"H'm," said Peggy, "that 's an amendment, and yet not a satisfactory one. At least you will own that her eyes

and her smile are beautiful—and she is altogether delightful?”

“Yes, she has beautiful eyes and she is charming.”

For the first time Stephen thought his cousin Peggy silly and tiresome ; he did not want to discuss Elsie Neale. It was a relief when his aunt began to question him as to his plans and how long he could spare for a visit to Wortham.

“You are my only adviser now, Steenie, you know,” the poor woman said, with tears in her eyes, “and there is so much I want to consult you about.”

CHAPTER VIII.

DICK LIMBER AT WORTHAM.

ELSIE NEALE, when she returned from Hillside, had said to her uncle that she thought it would be kind to ask Dick Limber to Wortham, as he had rather a dull and monotonous life at the farm.

“I wonder if the child cares for Master Dick,” Mr. Martin thought ; but he answered he would ask the young man before long.

Dick Limber was delighted to get his uncle's invitation. He set about his preparations with a lively air, and astonished his step-mother by his unwonted energy. Consciously his pleasurable expectation did not proceed from the thought of seeing Elsie again. He liked her very

well, and he had missed her pleasant talk and ways—that was all.

And yet, ever since her departure from Hillside, he had been longing for a little of the change he had spoken of to her so contemptuously.

All at once the unvarying monotony of farm life had shown itself wearisome, and the idea of going to a town like Wortham, which, when he went there once long ago with his mother, he had thought a large and busy place, stirred his rather slowly flowing blood. He was excited as a boy at school is on the arrival of "a hamper from home."

"This invitation has quite waked Dick up," Mrs. Limber said to her husband.

"Certain sure it has, my dear," said Mr. Limber, nodding his head sagaciously, "and I do hope he 'll take to his cousin in the visit. But Lord, how cold and slow lads are at love, nowadays. Why, bless me, at Dick's age I was like a bit of tinder."

And suddenly there rose up in Mr. Limber's memory the vision of a lovely face, first seen and fallen in love with long ago in the market-place of Wortham. He sighed, and refilled his pipe.

The evening before the day fixed for Dick's journey, his step-mother said to him after tea :

"Dick, come for a walk with me. I feel tired of being in the house all day ; your father's asleep as usual," she added, contemptuously.

"You must n't be hard on the governor, Mrs. Limber; he has had a very tiring day and a heap of worry besides. I'm sorry I've got to go to-morrow, for I believe he'll want me."

Mrs. Limber did not speak till they were some way from the house; then she said:

"You'll be delighted to see your cousin Elsie again, won't you, Dick?"

"Oh yes, I shall like to see her well enough, but I'm not thinking much of Elsie; it will be jolly to loaf about Wortham and see a little life—"

"Of course it will. I wish I was going with you; but still I cannot believe, Dick, that you won't be very glad to see Elsie again. If I was a man with such a pretty cousin, I should always be wanting to be with her."

"By Jove, that's good—precious slow that would be," Dick said, with a laugh; "but it's just a woman's idea. No, that's out of my line; girls are all very well in their place, but you may easily have too much of them. I'll own Elsie's a good specimen, but even she used to bore me with her talk."

"Dick, you're incorrigible. I'm disappointed, and so is your father, about you and Elsie. I do hope you'll do differently at Wortham, and make up for lost time."

"Now that's what I call absurd, Mrs. Limber, begging your pardon. Look here, Elsie does not care a fig for me beyond being her cousin."

"I am not so sure of that, Dick."

"I am, and I ought to know best. Do you think a girl would tease a fellow as she did me, if she was the least bit in love with him—eh?" said Dick, triumphantly.

"Yes, I do. It's sometimes a very good sign for a girl to tease,"—she paused. "Look here, Dick," she went on, "Elsie's a pretty girl and a charming girl—but do you know what a lot of money she will have?"

"There—you've let the cat out of the bag. It's this precious money that makes you and the governor so anxious about me and Elsie suiting, is it? I dare say you'll think me a fool, but it don't fetch me at all. And what's more, I think it's precious mean to marry for money."

Dick said this defiantly.

Mrs. Limber flushed crimson and she looked at him keenly. Did he insinuate any thing against her by this remark?

"My dear Dick, that's perfect nonsense, and when you're older you'll say so. 'Love in a cottage with cold potatoes' is out of date."

They walked on in silence after this. Dick felt savage. He was being lectured and advised, and he hated it. Mrs. Limber was angry with both Dick and with herself. Angry that he should be such "a silly boy," and angry that she had gone from her first resolution and spoken her wishes about Elsie so openly to him and roused the obstinacy in his nature. However, having begun, she decided it was better to go on.

"It seems to me a great mistake, Dick," she said presently, "and very selfish of you when you have such a golden chance offered you, not to take it. I'm sure there's not too much money in the family; we can't live at all as we ought to live. Really, one would think I was advising you to make up to a disagreeable girl, instead of to a sweet and pretty creature like Elsie Neale."

"I don't say a word against her," said Dick, sulkily, "but I don't want to be bothered about her. There's plenty of time before us."

"That's just where you're wrong, Dick; while you're shilly-shallying, some one else will step in and carry Elsie off before your face."

"So much the better, if he's a good-fellow," Dick said; nevertheless he felt a disagreeable twinge of jealousy at the suggestion.

"Perhaps you will kindly give him a helping hand," she sneered.

Dick shook himself impatiently.

"Oh, don't let us jaw about it any more. When I marry it will be to please myself, whether the girl's as rich as a Jew or as poor as a church mouse."

This was the first time Dick had ever put himself so positively in opposition to his step-mother's wishes or spoken rudely to her.

She was very angry, but she kept silent, indemnifying herself by much suppressed scorn.

She was disappointed—she had thought her influence

over him all-powerful, yet he had asserted himself and his opinions in a most defiant way. But it seemed useless to pursue the matter any further at this time, and she said, coldly :

“ I think I have walked far enough, and I dare say your father is awake. I shall go home. You need not come with me.”

Dick was ashamed of his outbreak, but as he did not feel contrite enough to apologize, he let his step-mother turn back alone.

Mr. Martin welcomed his nephew kindly, and told him he hoped he would make himself at home ; though when he saw Dick's handsome face and fine figure he questioned the wisdom of having asked him to Wortham.

Dick was struck by Elsie's looks.

“ Mrs. Limber is right,” he thought ; “ she *is* awfully pretty, and somehow she looks sweeter than she did at Hillside.”

Mr. Martin watched the cousins as they talked together, and he soon saw that his fear of inviting Dick to Wortham had been unfounded ; his nephew was not likely to take the fancy of a girl like Elsie. The old lawyer dearly loved his niece, and he had no intention of giving her up to any man. He deceived himself, however, by thinking that no young man could care for her as he did.

Meanwhile Dick was trying to make himself as agreeable as he could to *his* cousin. He was greatly puzzled

at the change in Elsie's manner, and the endeavor to account for it cost him more thinking than he had ever gone through on any subject ; after all, he arrived at no satisfactory conclusion. Sometimes Elsie was lively and teased him as she used to do at Hillside, but more frequently she was very quiet and left the chief part of the talking to him. Indeed, she had long fits of silence which she suddenly seemed to become aware of, and to disturb by a forced gayety. Dick was puzzled and piqued also, and rallied her on her "bad spirits," as he called them. But she only laughed and blushed, and told him he was a goose.

Elsie had decided on having a party while her cousin was at Wortham ; she wished him and Peggy Short to meet. She consulted her uncle, and having got his consent, she invited Mrs. Short and Peggy, two musical young ladies and their brother—a curate who played the violin,—and two or three friends with no "special gifts" to whom she wished to show attention.

"And of course, my dear," said her uncle, "you will ask Mr. Gordon."

"A party, Miss Neale, on Thursday, and this is Monday !" said Mrs. Castles, with a kind of surprised snort ; "that is sudden, miss, for both me and the guests, with all the creams and jellies and tarts to be made ; for I suppose, miss, you will like a nice little supper ?"

"Surely with your experience, Mrs. Castles," said Elsie, smiling, "three days are enough for any amount of

creams and jellies. I have given short notice because I don't want it to be a formal affair."

"That 's true, Miss Neale , but one does n't like to be taken sudden in these things. My mother used to say 'sudden deaths and sudden parties were always disagreeable.' However, miss," loftily, "if you 'll leave it all to me in perfect confidence, every thing shall be right and proper and as the master will like."

It seemed to Elsie that it would be pleasanter for Dick to make the Shorts' acquaintance beforehand. So, as soon as she had sent her notes of invitation, she asked her cousin to come out for a walk.

"I want to call on some friends, Dick ; you 'll go with me, won't you ?"

Dick was lounging in the little garden with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets. At the sound of her voice he looked up at the library window and thought what a pretty picture his cousin made with her fair head and straw-colored gown framed in by the narrow window and the dark old room behind her.

He ran up the iron steps and soon reached the library.

"Delighted to go with you !" then he looked sheepish. "You don't want me to make calls, do you ?"

Elsie laughed mischievously.

"It 's only one ; oh, Dick, surely you won't mind going with me to see Mrs. Short ; Uncle Edward likes her very much."

"I'd rather wait outside." Dick looked rueful.

"We'll settle it as we go along." Elsie ran away to get her hat.

"Surely Peggy and I shall brighten him up between us," she thought. "He really is provoking; so good-looking and yet so *gauche*."

Dick stared when Elsie opened the gate of the tiny cottage.

"Going to call here?" he said. Somehow he felt less shy at the modest look of the place, and he did not offer to remain outside.

The small maid-servant ushered them into the room, Mrs. Short had just laid down the newspaper which she was reading aloud, and Peggy did not seem at all disconcerted at being discovered darning a table-cloth.

Elsie introduced her cousin, and then she seated herself beside Mrs. Short, and left Dick and Peggy to talk.

"I have come to ask a favor," Elsie said, with so winning a smile in Mrs. Short's face that it would have been impossible for the kind, plump widow to refuse her. "Will you and Peggy spend next Thursday evening with us? We are going to have a little music, and you know how my uncle enjoys a rubber when he can get you for a partner.

Mrs. Short looked pleased.

"We shall like it of all things"; she glanced at Peggy, but she saw that her daughter was engaged and interested, and she went on talking to Elsie.

Peggy was in her element. She liked a man to be handsome and tall, and Dick was much handsomer than she expected to find him ; her present life was so secluded that, except when Stephen paid one of his rare visits, she rarely spoke to a gentleman, unless it were to Mr. Martin, or to the clergyman who was even older, or to Mr. Lovejoy the curate.

At first she had been a little demure with Dick Limber, but very soon an unguarded answer from him provoked a teasing rejoinder, and Dick was bewildered by the saucy mirth in the bright blue eyes which he had thought so quiet when he first looked at Miss Short.

"Then Elsie does nothing when she is at Hillside ; she only wanders up and down by the sea ?"

"She does little else, but she seems to like it."

"I am afraid," said Peggy, reflecting, "that somebody sets her a bad example—not you, of course ; it must be some of the animals ; no doubt you are very industrious," she added, gravely.

"Well, I don't know" ; he felt a little uneasy ; she might be chaffing him. "I do a great many things."

Peggy shook her head.

"That does not sound definite. At least, Elsie works hard at one thing, if it's only walking by the sea !" she said, saucily. "You don't look very hard-worked, Mr. Limber. You have what I call the rural aspect."

"What's that ?" said Dick, getting interested. "Do I look as if I'd got harness on ?"

Peggy laughed.

"You look as if time was of no consequence to you ; there's an air of leisure about you quite refreshing ; it's curious how soon people lose that when they come to live in a town."

Dick looked only half pleased.

"Do you mean I look like a country bumpkin, Miss Short?"

Peggy laughed again merrily.

"Oh, you're too terribly literal. I see Elsie has given me a bad character, or you would not translate my words so wrongly. Can't you understand that I was trying to pay you a compliment?" A pretty little flush came into her freckled face.

Dick made a low bow.

"I beg pardon. You must make excuse for my slow country wits"; then with a look which made the saucy eyes droop under his, he said: "You must come with Elsie next time, Miss Short, and see what we do at Hillside. You would wake us up a little."

"But I am very industrious, I assure you ; and suppose I become like Elsie, a wanderer by the sea-shore ; I should be good for nothing when I came back here.

"You could never be that," said Dick, gallantly ; then he said awkwardly, in a low voice: "You would always be nice to look at, you know."

Peggy shot him an indignant glance. She did not understand poor Dick's rusticity till she saw that he was *actually red with alarm* at his own audacity.

"How fond you must be of your cousin," she said.

"Yes, she's awfully nice."

"I think she's perfect."

Peggy looked lovingly across at her idol, and Dick thought he should like her to look so at him; he wished she would, but he was too shy to pay another compliment. Elsie saw that Peggy was looking toward her. She rose to say good-bye.

"Your mother has promised to come to us on Thursday at eight; and, dear, you will bring some songs."

Peggy's eyes sparkled. She had not been to a party since her father died, and when she shook hands with Dick she gave him a look which he felt was meant as forgiveness.

As soon as they had reached the road, to Elsie's surprise he began to speak first.

"I say, that is a jolly girl, Elsie; she *is* amusing, and it's easy enough to get on with her, twice as easy as with Miss Roberts, and I've known her ever so long."

Elsie looked delighted; Dick's eager manner and excited face spoke volumes to her.

"I am so glad you like her—I felt sure you would; and she's as good as she's merry. You don't often find a girl who is good and amusing and lively all at once."

"You are," said Dick, politely.

"My dear Dick! You have no idea yet how amusing Peggy is, when she's quite at her ease with you; and she is so clever, she can do all sorts of things, though she was

brought up to do nothing for herself. They used to be very well off till the father died."

"Did n't he make any provision for them?" said Dick, sternly.

"Uncle Edward says that he had invested his money badly, and that he had employed a dishonest lawyer; and as he died suddenly, every thing was in confusion, and he believes poor Mrs. Short was cheated. However, she is very resigned, and so is Peggy. Oh, no, Dick, I'm sure if the same thing had happened to me I should not have come out of it as Peggy has. I don't like doing things for myself; and you see with Mrs. Castles I get spoiled—she takes all care from me. I sometimes think I am as useless as a butterfly."

"Never mind," said Dick, "butterflies are very pretty, they are half the making of the summer."

Then he walked on silently, surprised at his own politeness, and thinking about Miss Short; he wished he could think of something to say next time he saw her, which would make her blue eyes look at him as they had looked at Elsie; he already forgave the turned-up nose and freckled forehead, which at first sight he thought spoiled a pretty face

CHAPTER IX.

A TEA PARTY.

ON Thursday morning Dick found himself in the way in the house. Elsie excused herself from taking a walk with him ; she had her flowers to see about, songs to look out, and various matters to arrange.

"You may help me do the nosegays, if you like."

But Dick's efforts in that way were so unsuccessful that he soon got released, and he walked away with his hands in his pockets, thanking heaven that he was not "a woman, of whom such finicking foolery could be expected"

Elsie dearly loved flowers, and had a natural gift of grouping them with grace and effect. She filled the large blue pots in the hall, and decorated the drawing-room and supper-table with charming nosegays, not bunches of flowers stuffed into vases and bowls, at hap-hazard, but arranged with a true artistic perception of the harmony of color.

Dick kept out of his cousin's way till evening, and then he came down into the drawing-room, looking in his evening clothes a very fine young fellow.

"I wonder what Peggy will think of him?" Elsie said to herself. "I believe he took a fancy to her on Tuesday—they are just suited. It would be so nice to have Peggy for a cousin."

"I say," Dick said, "how stunning it all looks!"

"Dick," said Elsie, "I shall expect you to hand cake

about, and turn over Miss Short's and my music, and make yourself generally useful."

Here the door opened for the entrance of Mr. Lovejoy.

The curate was a round, little man, rosy-faced, light-haired, and cherubic looking.

Dick disliked him heartily. They had only met twice, but the curate had treated the young farmer with a lofty and irritating condescension, and it was a satisfaction to Dick when the announcement of Mrs. and Miss Short and Mr. Brent interrupted the parson's voluble talk.

"My nephew," said Mrs. Short to Mr. Martin (who had come in just before), with a slight wave of her hand at Stephen. "He only came down from London this afternoon, or I should have asked permission to bring him."

"I am very glad to see the young gentleman," Mr. Martin said, courteously.

The color flew to Elsie's face as Stephen Brent came in, but when she shook hands with him she was pale.

"Let me introduce you to my cousin," she said.

"Mr. Brent, Mr. Limber—Mrs. Short, you know my cousin Dick."

Elsie felt pleased at the easy way with which Dick bore the general gaze at this introduction. Indeed, the young fellow did not reveal that he was suffering from a good deal of inward shyness.

Stephen regarded the young man's fine proportions

and handsome features with rather a disdainful look on his face.

But now the two musical young ladies and their brother were announced. The Misses Ripstone were very highly colored, both in complexion and dress—the latter much bedizened with gay ribbons. They had high-pitched voices and great volubility of utterance. Their brother, by way of contrast, affected a slow and dignified method of speech—probably he was also slow of thought,—the three when together were continual stumbling-blocks to each other.

Elsie seated herself at the tea-table (a fashion which Mr. Martin rigidly maintained in his house); she asked Peggy Short to help her, and they made a pretty and animated pair as they went through their duties.

Stephen Brent and Dick Limber vied in their attention to Elsie, and in helping, under her direction, to distribute the tea, coffee, and buttered cakes among the guests; each, meanwhile, regarding the other with a certain suspicion which amused Elsie.

Peggy entertained herself with young Ripstone—who considered handing tea and cake quite beneath his dignity;—her lively talk danced, as it were, with light steps round his heavy platitudes. This did not prevent her from occasionally exchanging a few words with Dick.

The last of the arrivals was Mr. Gordon, a tall, angular, clever-looking man of about thirty, with spectacles, a bushy head of hair, a very stiff shirt collar, and also a very

stiff set of opinions. He was acquainted with the Misses Ripstone, and they quickly got him into conversation on music, to them an all-engrossing topic ; and any one listening to Mr. Gordon would have thought he knew as much about it as they did. He was very oracular on music and art ; in fact, he had the faculty of acquiring a surface knowledge on many subjects, and of producing this knowledge with an air of authority. But he was really a sound lawyer ; he had far more than surface knowledge in that direction.

" I think, ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Martin, who had been enjoying a talk, over his tea, with Mrs. Short—the fair plump little widow was a great favorite with the worthy old lawyer,—“ I think if you have all done tea, we might now have a little music. Elsie, my dear, will you open the ball ? ”

Elsie was listening to Stephen Brent's description of some of the countries he had seen, and she wished her uncle's request had not come so soon. But she never kept Uncle Edward waiting.

" Yes, uncle, what song shall I sing ? ”

This was a formula always gone through between uncle and niece on these occasions.

" ' Oft in the Stilly Night,' my dear," Mr. Martin said.

Stephen offered his arm to Elsie, and took her to the pianoforte. She sang the song simply but with great expression. Stephen turned over the music for her, while Dick stood sullenly looking on, at a distance · he considered that Stephen had taken his place.

"Confound the fellow," he thought.

"Thank you so very much," Stephen Brent said, in a low voice, when the song ended, and Elsie rewarded his praise with a smile and a blush.

The Misses Ripstone now played an effective duet with brilliant execution, the cherubic curate accompanying them on his violin.

"You play of course, Miss Short," Dick said, under cover of the performance ; for, seeing Peggy was at last deserted by young Ripstone, he had made a violent effort against his shyness, and had sat down beside her, partly urged thereto by the wish to show Elsie that he was quite indifferent to the attention she was receiving from the young sailor, but also anxious to have another look into Peggy's blue eyes.

"Yes, I can play a little, but I never play before people."

"Don't you ? that's a pity. But I'm sure you sing."

"Chiefly to amuse myself."

"But it would amuse us too. You will sing, won't you, after this is over, Miss Short ?" Dick said, feeling bolder as he went on. "I'm sure by the sound of your voice you can sing like—like any thing," he said, rather at a loss for a fitting simile.

"No, indeed ; don't ask me, it would be dreadful," Peggy said, with a pretty little shiver ; "there are plenty to sing without me." She looked timid.

Dick thought : "She is a sweet little creature, and not at all conceited."

Just then Elsie cast a glance at them. She saw that Peggy was smiling, and Dick admiring.

"It 's all right," she said to herself ; "they are getting on well."

Stephen Brent caught her eyes travelling toward Dick, and then the pleased look on her face. "Has your cousin, Mr. Limber, been staying here long?" he said, abruptly.

"Only a few days."

"Do you see much of him?"

Elsie felt disposed to be mischievous at this catechism. She flashed a saucy look at Stephen.

"Not so much as I should like," she answered, "for he lives at some distance from Wortham, by the sea."

"He 's quite a boy, is n't he?" in a patronizing tone.

"He would not care to hear you say so."

"Will you sing another song, Miss Neale? the last was charming." Mr. Gordon stood beside her, his face held stiff and magisterial by his very high shirt collar. "Miss Ripstone says she will be proud to accompany you."

And to Stephen's disgust Elsie went off with Mr. Gordon to the pianoforte.

She was greeted there by Mr. Lovejoy, the curate.

"Ah, how delightful, you are going to sing another of those sweet melodies, I hope? You know 'Love's Young Dream,' don't you, Miss Neale?"

Elsie smiled, but Mr. Gordon said, repressively: "I

think Miss Neale is going to sing 'Near Woodstock Town.' "

"Oh, yes, that suits her voice beautifully," said Miss Ripstone, the younger. "Let me look for it, dear."

"I think," Mr. Gordon went on, while Miss Jane Ripstone searched for the song, "that one quickly tires of Moore; he is too saccharine."

"If you mean too sweet, I cannot agree with you," said the curate, with a sniff, "especially when the melodies are sung as Miss Neale sings them."

Mr. Gordon felt that his self-assertion had led him into a breach of politeness, and that the curate had scored.

"Here is the song," said Miss Ripstone.

"When does your nephew go to sea again?" Mr. Martin was saying to Mrs. Short.

He had been taking note of Stephen Brent's admiration for, and of his attentions to, his niece. He was glad when he saw Mr. Gordon take her off to the pianoforte.

"Very soon, I am sorry to say," said the plump little lady, fanning herself. "You cannot think what dear Stephen is to me when he is with me. His advice is so valuable—and I have no one but him to take counsel with now," she added, with a sigh, throwing up her still pretty eyes to the ceiling.

"I hope you will always command my advice, as a friend, my dear Mrs. Short, at all times," said the old lawyer, gallantly. "I shall only be too proud"—he stopped, for Elsie was beginning to sing. "Sh—h!" he

said, loudly ; he made it a rigorous rule never to speak himself or to allow talking while a song was being sung.

The singing and pianoforte-playing went on so vigorously, varied by the curate's violin performances, which he evidently enjoyed more than his audience did, that there was no time for the promised rubber. Supper was said to be ready before Mr. Martin had even thought of proposing cards ; so instead he gave his arm to Mrs. Short, and led her to the dining-room.

Certainly Mrs. Castles had kept her word. It was well that most of the party were young, and that they lived in pure country air, so that they could do justice to her dainties.

But Elsie and Stephen spent the time in talking which ought to have been devoted to Mrs. Castles' viands.

CHAPTER X.

A WALK IN THE LANES.

IT was not Elsie only who thought that Peggy Short seemed admirably suited to Mr. Limber. Mr. Martin and Mrs. Short had also studied the young people during the evening, and finally, when Dick had seated himself beside Peggy in a far-off corner of the room, the middle-aged lady and gentleman exchanged glances, though they were both too discreet to discuss the subject.

Next morning at the breakfast-table, which was full of elaborate variety from last night's supper, Mr. Martin asked his nephew how he liked Miss Short.

"She is a very jolly girl," Dick said. "No nonsense about her."

Mr. Martin's eyebrows rose, and a comical smile flitted over his lips.

"I wonder what that means?" He looked at Elsie. "Do you feel it a compliment, my dear, to be told there's 'no nonsense' about you?"

"Oh, yes; I'm sure Dick means it as a compliment. I suppose," she went on, "you will call on the Shorts this morning, Dick, and ask how they are. Please give Peggy my love; she said she wanted to copy a song. Will you take it to her?"

"Yes. Is that cousin staying with them?" Dick looked grave. •

"Oh, no." Elsie wished her uncle would not keep his eyes fixed on her face. "They have no room for a visitor; he is at the inn, I suppose."

"I don't take to him," Dick said, abruptly. "Do you, sir?" he said, appealing to his uncle.

Mr. Martin saw a quick flush come into Elsie's face, and he felt irritable.

"I really can't say," he said, indifferently. "I had so little talk with him. He does very well for his profession, I dare say; a sailor does not want much brains, you know."

"He seemed to have such a lot to say," said Dick, "I thought he must be clever. Do you think so, Elsie?"

She thought Dick was trying to tease her before her uncle, and she felt indignant.

"He is very clever," she said; "Mrs. Short says so."

"If Mrs. Short says so, the matter is settled," said Mr. Martin, laughing. "That pleasant little lady has very decided opinions on most subjects. Now I must leave you two to talk over last night. *Au revoir* till dinner-time. I can't be home for lunch, Elsie," he added; "I have to go over to Tilehurst with Gordon on business."

Elsie felt very unsettled this morning. She went into the garden; then she tried to practise a song; but she could not find rest in any thing; and, when she came back into the library, Dick was still poring over his newspaper.

"I thought you were going to Mrs. Short's."

"Well, I 'll go if you 'll come with me."

"No, I can't go out this morning. I—I think you had best go alone."

Elsie felt sure that Mr. Brent would spend his time at the cottage, and, though she wished to see him, she did not choose to run after him.

"No, Elsie; please don't ask me to call there. I'd rather take a walk with you."

"Very well, I 'll go."

She would have preferred to go alone, but, as Dick was

soon going back to Hillside, she felt she ought to be kind to him.

One of the charms of Wortham is, or rather was, in its green hedge-rows bordering meadows pied with golden buttercups ; now, alas ! the quiet little town has outgrown its limits, and has bubbled over the surrounding lanes in ugly red-brick streets and semi-detached villas with gabled tops and elaborate windows. But some few years ago there was country close by, and when Elsie and her cousin started for their walk they soon found themselves in a lane with hedges on each side, and partly shaded by tall elm trees which rose here and there behind the hedge on one side.

The hedges themselves were monotonous, but there was plenty of color on the high banks they grew out of, and here Elsie began to gather a wild nosegay.

"What can you want them for?" Dick said, amused at the perseverance with which she scrambled after tiny hidden blossoms, and the admiration she showed for them ; "they 'll die before you get home, and your own garden flowers are much prettier ; these are such trumpery."

"Oh, Dick, that 's heresy ; I shall read Wordsworth to you when we get home—"

She stopped ; there was a gate across the lane, and beyond this another lane came into it from the right—the side on which the trees grew ; down this lane were coming Peggy Short and Stephen Brent, but they were some

way off, and were talking so earnestly that they did not see Elsie and her cousin.

"Hullo! they look just like lovers," Dick said. "I say, Elsie, I think we had better go back and not spoil sport."

"Lovers!—nonsense, Dick! Why, people might as well say you and I are lovers; they are cousins who don't often meet, that's all."

Dick thought she was very pretty with that little offended flush on her clear skin; he looked affectionately at her.

"Cousins are lovers sometimes," he said, in a low voice, but Elsie pretended not to hear. She felt that in another minute either Peggy or Mr. Brent would see them standing at the gate.

"Elsie!" Peggy cried, as she saw her friend.

Elsie had never felt so shy as now, when she shook hands with Mr. Brent; Dick longed to throw the young sailor into the ditch for staring in that way at his cousin. But Peggy did not give him much time to be jealous in.

"This is a pleasant meeting," she said. "Stephen—you can walk with Mr. Limber; I have been talking to you long enough."

"The road is broad enough for four, Peggy," and as he spoke, to Dick's intense disgust, this "confounded sailor" placed himself between the two girls, and he was left to walk on in front. He fumed and swore to himself, but he

was soon mollified. Stephen Brent had no wish to deprive him of Peggy's society.

"Do you like honeysuckle, Miss Neale?" Brent had been looking at Elsie's nosegay, and just now, in the hedge high above, an exquisite spray of creamy blossom sent its perfume down over them.

"Yes." Then, as she saw it: "But oh, Mr. Brent, you can't possibly reach that."

Peggy had been longing to leave her cousin and Elsie to themselves; she walked quietly on, as if she had no suspicion of Stephen's intention, and Dick at once fell back beside her.

"You don't care about wild flowers—that's a comfort," he said, complacently.

"I never said so—how can you know what I like?"

"By using my eyes; you have not gathered a blossom, and my cousin has both hands full. I consider her love for weeds a mania."

"Take care," Peggy said; "if you had looked up the lane we came down, you would see that it is newly made—that its banks are not even grassed;—if there are any flowers there, I'm sure they can't feel at home enough to blossom."

Dick laughed; the notion of a flower's feelings was beyond him.

"You won't find many flowers at Hillside," he said. "Elsie gathers queer, twisted-looking things; but they're quite different from these—not so much green about

them"; then he said, shyly: "When 's your cousin going away, Miss Short?"

Peggy was puzzled.

"I hope not for some time; we seldom see him, and, when he goes, he'll be away a year or more," she said, sadly.

Dick longed to ask how long Elsie had known Mr. Brent, but there was a lurking smile round Peggy's lips, and of all things he disliked to be laughed at.

"What a time he is about getting that bit of honeysuckle," he said; "I should have thought a sailor might have climbed up in less than no time."

Peggy's face had been shaded by a dainty black parasol lined with red, a gift of Elsie's; as Dick spoke she raised this, and gave him a glance so brimful of mirth and mischief that Dick burst out laughing.

"I'm glad to hear you can laugh," she said; "I began to think you were seventy."

"Why? But he did not" look sheepish; somehow, as he had said, Peggy put him at ease. He did not feel conscious of his shyness, and so he was better pleased with himself.

"Well, why?" said Peggy, saucily. "Ask yourself."

She gave a little glance over her shoulder. Stephen had come down the hedge bank, and was bending over Elsie, while he gave her the bunch of honeysuckle he had gathered.

"Ah! I see."

Dick felt half-sulky, and then he looked at the pretty, sparkling face beside him. Why should he worry himself? The sailor was making the best use of his opportunities, and amusing himself with Elsie, why should not he do the same with this charming girl? He might never get such another chance—there was not such a girl as Peggy in all the country round Hillside. Dick remembered dumpy, sandy-haired Miss Roberts, and the attention and deference she exacted, and he thought it would be “awfully jolly” if the parson’s daughter were like Peggy Short.

“She is a tempting little morsel, and no mistake.” Dick’s admiration grew as he walked beside her—“A sort of girl it would do one good to kiss; but she would n’t like it, I fancy, she’s not one of that sort. Any way, I’ll get Mrs. Limber to ask her to Hillside.”

Stephen had certainly been very long getting the honeysuckle, but he wanted to be free of Dick; his dislike was even stronger than the young farmer’s. He did not know how much Elsie cared for her cousin, and he knew in a few weeks at most he should be afloat again, while this good-looking young farmer could see Elsie as often as he pleased.

Elsie thanked him warmly for the honeysuckle, and gave him so sweet a look that his heart sank heavily. He told himself it was impossible that so charming a girl could have been left for him.

“It would be too good luck by half,” he thought, as

they strolled on. "She belongs to some one, if it's not this cousin. I don't believe Peggy knows."

This would account, too, he thought, for the entire absence of flirtation in Miss Neale; she was quite different in this way from his lively cousin.

They walked on side by side in that dangerous tell-tale silence, which neither wished to break. The sympathy between them was so perfect that they felt as if they could not disturb it.

All at once a lark began to sing, as it rose out of the field behind the hedge, and broke the sweet dumb spell. Elsie looked up, and met Stephen's eyes. He wondered, as he gazed into their liquid depths, how he could have been content to let her keep them fixed on the ground; but something in his glance made the girl's eyelids droop again, and brought a warm color to her cheeks.

"You are not going away from Wortham again?" he said, coming closer to her.

"Oh, no. I seldom go away."

"I have only a few weeks longer," he sighed.

"You are going on a long voyage?"

"Yes; a year at least. You will have forgotten—all about me before I come back."

"I shall not forget you." Then she looked up at him archly. "Peggy's friends could not forget you if they wished to. She is always talking of you."

Stephen fixed his eyes on her face.

"I see," he smiled. "You had been bored with the

sound of my name before you even saw me. You have really been very forbearing to treat me so kindly, Miss Neale."

Elsie felt surprised by his tone.

"I am glad you think me amiable," she laughed ; "but you have not done any thing to make me unkind, you know."

She was glad to be able to laugh. She thought Mr. Brent was touchy and not what she had imagined him, after all.

"Then you are always as kind to others as you are to me, unless they behave rudely?"

Elsie felt as if tears were coming. It was unkind of him to ask her such a question. She did not know how to answer him. She looked up. Mr. Brent was frowning. Elsie was miserable to have vexed him, and she could not think of any thing to say. One moment she longed to overtake Peggy and Dick, and then she felt that if Mr. Brent went away in his angry fit, he and she might never be friends again.

She waited. Then the simple directness of her nature came to her help.

"You do not think me kind now," she said. "I have in some way vexed you."

"Oh, no," he laughed. "Don't judge by my face ; I often frown when I am thinking, and I was thinking just then that I had been a fool, that's all—I believe your cousin is waiting for us. See, he is standing still, and

looking over his shoulder. Shall we go a little faster?"

Elsie could not answer. She was full of vexation, but it was plain that Mr. Brent did not care for a longer *tête-à-tête*. She went on in silence till they reached Peggy and Dick.

"What a time you have been over your honeysuckle," said Peggy. "You won't get on in your profession, Steenie, if you don't climb quicker than that. Ah! I forget, you mean to become a landsman; so it does n't matter so much."

Stephen answered her gayly, and Elsie forced herself to seem lively, but she observed that during the rest of the walk Mr. Brent addressed all his talk to his cousin Peggy; she noticed too that Dick stood his ground, and did not allow himself to be turned out of the conversation, which was very lively till they reached the quaint old house.

They parted at the gate. Peggy declared she must go home, and her cousin said he would go with her.

"Just as if she wants him," said Dick, as he followed Elsie into the house. "I bet you she'd far rather have me."

"Well-done, Dick; you are improving."

Elsie ran away up stairs to take off her hat.

CHAPTER XI.

DICK RETURNS TO THE FARM.

DICK LIMBER'S stay with his uncle and cousin was over, and on his way back to Hillside he was revolving all that had happened in the past fortnight. It had been a sort of apprenticeship in knowledge of life to him. His mind had developed greatly during the visit ; he had seen a great many people, and had listened to much good talk, and all he had seen and heard had stored his brain and set him thinking. His feelings, too, had largely expanded, and he began to regard Elsie after a very different fashion from the way he had regarded her at the farm. At Wortham she had appeared to him in more varied phases of character than she had shown herself at Hillside ; he saw how universally she was liked and admired ; and he was awakened to the fact that, apart from any money considerations, she was a prize worth the winning.

Stephen Brent's appearance on the scene as a favored and established admirer had been a severe shock to Dick ; and piecing together (for Dick, a most unwonted and ingenious performance) the change of manner in Elsie he had observed when he first arrived at his uncle's house, and all he had seen on the night of the teaparty and on several occasions afterward, he was forced sorrowfully to own that his cousin's behavior toward the young sailor differed greatly from her behavior to him.

There was no doubt in his mind that Mr. Brent was very much fascinated by Elsie. It had at last become painful to Dick to see them together. The drooping of Elsie's sweet eyes, the rising blush as Brent laughed and talked with her, were misery to Dick. The poor fellow did not understand what was the matter with him at these times ; he only knew that he would have liked to take Stephen Brent by the shoulders and put him out of the room.

On the morning after the walk, he began to joke his cousin on what he called her flirtation with the sailor, but she "shut him up," as he said to himself, so very decidedly that he did not venture to go on with his rather clumsy teasing.

All these things Dick sorrowfully turned over in his mind as he travelled back to Hillside. He was not at all satisfied with his visit as regarded Elsie ; she had parted from him kindly enough, but he felt bitterly how different would have been the parting had Stephen Brent been in his place.

"Confound the fellow !" he said. "I wish he had never come off the sea. I should have made it all safe with Elsie, I know, but for him. Mrs. Limber was right when she said I'd lost my chance with her when she was staying at the farm. I don't believe Elsie knew the fellow then ; as far as I can make out from Miss Peggy, he is a new acquaintance. I sha'n't tell Mrs. Limber about him ; she'll do nothing but tease me and twit me if I do, and

we shall quarrel. I wonder if Elsie and that chap are really fond of one another. Hang it ! I have been a fool. Peggy Short is a jolly, pretty little thing, but she 's very different from Elsie ; she 's a regular little flirt—flirts all round, I 'll bet. I should like her better if she was n't that precious sailor's cousin." Dick had been fascinated with Peggy, and, if there had been no Stephen Brent, it is possible that Peggy would have won the day ; but he did not choose, as he said, to be cut out with his own cousin. "After all," he went on, "I don't think Uncle Martin would encourage any thing between Elsie and that Brent. I 've seen him eyeing them pretty sharply. It 's lucky the cheeky beggar is going to sea soon ; I 'll get Mrs. Limber to ask Elsie to Hillside again, and then ——" Here Dick went off into speculations as to what might happen if he got Elsie to himself again at the farm.

Dick arrived at Hillside when Mr. and Mrs. Limber were having their tea. Mrs. Limber welcomed her stepson home with a smiling face.

"How well you are looking, Dick !" she said. She intended to ignore the dispute they had had before he went away.

"I 'm main glad to see you, my boy," said the hearty farmer, as he shook hands with his son. "Mother and I have missed you rarely, but we 've had more time to make love to one another, have n't we, ma'am ?"

Mrs. Limber shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Don't be so silly, Richard."

"Well, Dick, how have you got on with the old lawyer and the pretty Elsie, hey, my boy?" the farmer said.

"Oh, all right, father. Mr. Martin was very kind to me."

"That's right. Wortham's a first-rate place, ain't it, Dick? Plenty of life and fun going on, market-day. My word! I've had many a spree there myself," he went on, rubbing his hands gleefully. "There was a mort of pretty girls in Wortham in my time. I should like to see the old place again, that I should."

"Mr. Limber!" In tones of disgust from his wife.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Limber; of course I should take you with me. Why, my dear, I'm talking of days when you were n't born—and likely enough not even thought of. But, I say, Dick, about Elsie. What did you—" Catching his wife's eye fixed on him, he stopped. "I mean, how did Elsie seem in her uncle's house? Sweet as a May morning, as usual, hey?"

"She was just the same as she was here," Dick said, indifferently.

"That's right; a dear girl she is. Come out presently, Dick. I want to show you half a dozen black and white sheep Mr. Hartley has sent me. Spanish they are, and real beauties. Sam Brown's as proud of 'em as a butterfly of his wings."

"I'll come in ten minutes, father. I'm hungry."

As Dick had only written a few hasty notes home while

at his uncle's, his step-mother's curiosity was excited to learn fuller details of his proceedings. As soon as they were alone she said :

"I thought you would have stayed longer at Wortham, Dick."

"I was n't asked to stay."

A bright, eager look came into Mrs. Limber's eyes. Had Dick been making love to his cousin after all ? She looked at him keenly, but she only said :

"Oh, how's that ?"

"Uncle had to go up to London on business for a few days."

"I suppose he did n't like to leave you and Elsie together ?" Mrs. Limber said, with an arch smile.

"I 'm sure I don't know," Dick answered, shortly. "As likely as not."

"How does Elsie amuse herself all day at Wortham ?"

"Oh, much as other girls do, I suppose. She reads, and she works, and she pays visits, and she takes walks."

"By herself ?"

"Oh, no, I went with her sometimes. But she has got a dear friend who is always ready to go with her anywhere."

"Some old lady, I suppose ?"

"No, quite a young one. Elsie and Miss Short are inseparable."

Mrs. Limber started, and changed color.

"Miss Short, did you say, Dick ?"

"Yes, Peggy Short, a jolly little girl, though she's rather too lively for me."

"Does she live at Wortham?"

"Yes; with her mother, a nice little woman."

"There's no Mr. Short, then?"

"No. Mrs. Short is a parson's widow."

A strange sensation came over Mrs. Limber. She shivered, and then she grew hot and sick. There was no doubt it was her old friend Peggy Short. How the name brought back the memory of Stephen Brent. She thought she had parted with these people for good; she hoped that their lives would never cross again. And here they were—full in her path.

Dick wanted to change the subject. He feared, if she went on questioning him, she would get out of him something about Stephen Brent.

"I shall go to father now," he said.

And he lounged out of the room.

Before Dick had been at home a week there came a letter to the farmer from the old lawyer at Wortham. Mr. Martin said that he was obliged to go to Scotland on business, and, as he expected to be away some time, he would be both glad and obliged if they would receive Elsie again at Hillside. He feared she might be lonely at home; and also he intended to leave Mr. Gordon in the house, whom he had just taken into partnership.

Mr. Martin had observed with growing disquietude

Stephen Brent's admiration for his niece ; he also saw that she was well disposed to receive this worship, and he did not wish that the intimacy should go on while he was away from Wortham. Added to his dislike of the idea that Elsie should form an attachment that would take her from him, was his determination that with his consent she should never marry a sailor. It was also true that he did not wish her to be much thrown in the way of Mr. Gordon, whom, greatly as he admired as a good man of business, he did not regard with particular favor as a possible husband for his niece.

Dick Limber blushed with pleasure when he heard his uncle's proposal—it chimed in so well with his own wishes ; it seemed too as if Mr. Martin favored his hopes.

Mrs. Limber marked the blush ; she smiled and guessed the truth. Dick had been silent on the subject of Elsie, in spite of his step-mother's efforts to extract from him all that had passed during his visit.

Her husband had said to her several times : "Any news to tell, Harrie ? Have you found out any thing ?"

And when she answered "No," he would say, putting his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat ; "tell you what 't is ma'am, to my thinkin', the crop in that direction don't ripen at all."

"Well, my dear"—he had read the letter aloud with some difficulty, for the lawyer's cramped hand puzzled him ; but he would not give it up,—“of course you will ask the dear girl. I shall be main glad to see her again, and it's

more pleasant-like for you, my dear, to have some one o' your own kind to talk with, 'stead of always us men."

"I suppose we must ask her," Mrs. Limber said. She had been thinking what should be her answer while the letter was read. She was really jealous of Elsie's influence over her husband ; but, regarding her as a probable wife for Dick, she saw the importance of having her again at Hillside—under her own influence.

"Yes, yes," said the farmer. "Why not ? I should think, Dick, you'd be glad to have Elsie again for your companion."

"Oh, yes, father,"—Dick looked into his cup, trying to hide his satisfaction,—"I don't mind her coming again."

"Don't mind ! O Dick, Dick, you're not half a fellow !" said his father, shaking his head. "Why, at your age the idea of a pretty girl comin' to th' house, waked me up like a clap o' thunder. Another cup o' tea, please, my dear. My word ! how Elsie will admire the Spanish beauties, and that new litter o' pigs. She's a dear girl for taking interest in the stock. Sam says it's wonderful."

Mrs. Limber's lip curled.

"Yes, she's quite cut out for a farmer's wife," she said. "I confess an admiration for pigs and chickens is not in my line. You knew that before you married me, Mr. Limber."

"Here—unusual circumstance—a joke suggested itself

to the good-natured farmer. He rubbed his hands, and laughed in advance.

"Well, that's good, when you're a duck yourself, my pet," he said.

"I must go and speak to cook." Mrs. Limber spoke so coldly that the farmer felt ashamed of his audacity. "You'll answer the letter, and say all that is necessary about Miss Neale's visit."

Her husband stared after her.

"Bless my soul, Dick," he said, "what's up now? Last time she was all agog to have Elsie here. Women and weather-cocks!—oh, Lord!—oh, Lord!"

CHAPTER XII.

SAM BROWN.

ELSIE had been a week at Hillside, and, in spite of Mrs. Limber's jealousy of her, she thought how much the girl had gained both in beauty and charm since her last visit; there was a subdued gentleness about her, a softened light in her sweet blue eyes. Dick had hoped that, again at the farm, she would resume her former manner with him, but finding she no longer teased him, and remarking her long, silent, and dreamy fits, he began to tease her in an awkward, cub-like fashion. Mr. Limber noted this, and believed things were going as he wished.

"I tell you what 't is, wife," the farmer said one after-

noon, when Elsie had left them sitting together. "I believe you 'll be right after all. You should have laid a wager on it wi' me, Harrie; I believe Dick's getting sweet on his cousin, and she's thinking it over. Please the pigs she'll have him after all."

Mrs. Limber shook her head angrily.

"No, Dick has lost his chance. If he had not been a dull, insensible fellow, he might have had the girl; now I fear it is too late. She——"

She hesitated. Why need she tell her suspicions? She was determined that Elsie should marry Dick, even supposing it was as she feared it might be; but there was no use in arousing Mr. Limber's sympathy for the girl, and she felt sure he would take her side in any case.

"Too late, hey?" The farmer blew aside a cloud of smoke and looked at his wife. "What d'ye mean by that, Harrie? Some one else has stepped in, perhaps; is that it, ma'am?"

"Please don't call me ma'am," she said, irritably; "you know I hate it. As regards Elsie, I am only speaking from my own idea of a girl's feelings. When she was here before, she really tried to attract Dick, and he was as blind as a mole, though I did the best I could to open his eyes. I wonder she stood it. Why, if you had behaved like that to me on our first acquaintance, do you think I would ever have looked at you again? A girl with any spirit don't care to wait while a man shilly-shallies about her."

The farmer stretched out his hand and pinched his wife's soft cheek.

"My word, no man would have shilly-shallied about you, my pet," he said. "The wonder to me is why you were n't snapped up long before I had my chance. By George, I was in luck. But don't you be hard on Dick, my beauty ; you just talk to him quietly—you know the way ; don't taunt him—I think you 'll find he 'll listen."

His pipe being done, the farmer rose up and shook himself, kissed his wife, and went out into the farm-yard.

As he went through the huge kitchen into which the staircase came down, he saw Elsie sitting in the window-seat there, dreamily stroking a white kitten which lay sleeping on her knee.

"Dick must brush up," the father thought ; "she 's just the wife for him. She's a sweet creature, bless her, and she 'd suit the old place well ; she 'd never be in the way, and Harrie likes her—'t would be the very thing." That which had at first seemed so desirable for the sake of the money had now become a longing for the sake of the girl. "She looks a pretty picture, she does"; he trod gently for fear of disturbing her, and passed quietly out of the door in search of his factotum, Sam Brown.

He found that worthy in the act of brooming three small pigs, who, taking a mean advantage of their size, had crept between the bars of the gate, and were eating up some corn which had been flung to the chickens.

"I say, Sam," shouted Mr. Limber.

Sam Brown turned his gypsy face towards his master, grinning from one eared ear to the other, and showing a set of fine teeth. He was a lithe, active fellow of middle height, with a complexion as rich as that of an Italian.

He was from the South, a shrewd fellow, and a most useful man on the farm; he was never idle, though he dearly loved a gossip, especially with a woman. He was fully trusted by Mr. Limber; indeed, as has been said, he was his factotum.

"Well, Sam," the farmer smiled, in answer to the ever-broadening grin on Sam's dark face, "pigs got through the bars, hey? Best stop the gate with some o' that wire netting Mr. Dick brought from Wortham."

Sam touched his hat.

"Ees, zur. Ah was thinkin' Miss Elsie mut loike a leetle pig to take back wi' her, an' hev it for a pet loike."

"A queer sort of pet," said the farmer. "But I 'm in a hurry, Sam. I want you down in the lower croft."

Mrs. Limber, from the angle of the house, had watched her husband's departure. She set no value on his opinion, but she was glad to make it an excuse for breaking the silence which existed between her and Dick on the subject of Elsie.

Since his return he had never of his own will spoken to her about his cousin. It was plain he had not forgotten their quarrel.

She knew well enough where to find her step-son ; she had seen him go to the summer-house ; yes, there he was alone ; but to-day she saw that his pipe had not had a soothing effect upon him.

He turned a sullen face toward his step-mother.

"Well, what do you want now ?"

"I want to talk to you about Elsie." Mrs. Limber surprised herself by coming thus straight to her point ; she so infinitely preferred beating about the bush.

Dick frowned.

"You 'd better leave me alone," he said. "I don't want to be teased about Elsie."

He turned his back on her, and went on smoking.

Mrs. Limber sat down beside the window of the summer-house, and looked across the turnip-field toward the flag-staff.

"Did you see a change in her when you were at Wortham ?" Mrs. Limber was still looking over the turnip-field.

"A change ! I don't know what on earth you are driving at now." Dick felt tormented and irritable. He and his step-mother had never been quite the same together since that memorable dispute before he went to Wortham ; but he had seldom been so captious as he was to-day.

Suddenly Mrs. Limber turned round and smiled at him.

"Dick, dear," she said, "I shall wish your cousin had

never come to Hillside, if she is to change your feelings to me. I used to consider you my friend,"—her voice trembled a little,—“next to your father, the best friend I had, and now you are always ready to take offence, and to suspect motives which don't exist.”

Dick moved uneasily, but he was silent.

“Perhaps I was wrong,”—her voice was so sad that he felt uncomfortable. “I liked Elsie so much that I thought she would make you happy—however, there's an end to that now.”

She looked at him, and she saw that he was listening attentively.

“How do you mean an end?”—he spoke more gently.

“Why, I mean that Elsie is in love.”

Dick started, and got very red.

“Some one else has taken a fancy to her, and she has lost her heart to him.”

Dick muttered, but she could not make out his words. Presently he said :

“Has she told you so?”

Mrs. Limber resisted an inclination to laugh, but she felt that she was regaining her power over her step-son, and she was not going to do any thing likely to irritate him.

“Well, no,” she said, quietly ; “but you know I am a witch about love affairs, and a lively girl does not become quiet and dreaming all at once without a reason. Don't you remember she used to tease you all day long, and now

she has hardly a word for you. No, no, girls don't look as lackadaisical as Elsie does, and have long fits of silence, for nothing ; but never mind her, what I want is to be friends with you, Dick, as we used to be. That is what I came here to say."

She looked at him half shyly, and Dick, ashamed of his sulky fit, smiled at her ; he grasped her hand and shook it heartily. He could not have owned himself in the wrong, he felt too awkward ; perhaps he felt more deeply ashamed of his rudeness because he had not the grace necessary to carry him through an apology. But his handsome blue eyes were full of contrition as he looked at Mrs. Limber.

"What a good-looking lout he is ; but how he has hurt me !" She walked slowly back to the house, petting the squeezed fingers, and wondering what would follow on her hints.

"It is not over with him," she thought ; "his eyes literally blazed when I said she loved some one else. I wonder how Elsie would feel if he looked at her like that ? She won't meet with any one so handsome as Dick is in a hurry. I can't make out whether she cares about looks. Sometimes I think she is not as shallow as I thought she was," she frowned. "I cannot quite make her out."

She was not likely to understand Elsie ; and the girl was not in sympathy with her. Elsie thought Mrs. Limber very handsome, very stylish, and clever ; but some-

thing—she could not define what it was—had from the first kept her from making a friend of her uncle's wife, and she had never talked about her feelings to Mrs. Limber.

Mrs. Limber went round the house, instead of going in at the door. As she passed the window of the house-place, she saw Elsie still sitting in the window, with the kitten on her knee. At this sight she walked on, still frowning.

"She is far better suited to be a farmer's wife than I am. She sits for ever so long at a time in that horrid, draughty place without caring. I do wonder at it in a girl brought up as she has been."

Meantime, Dick stood looking out over the sea. He was one of those easy-going persons who think life is long enough for the fulfilment of all their wants and wishes. His creed was that care and energy were alike useless; all would in the end come right as surely as fruit came in autumn.

Ever since Elsie left Hillside, he had felt a want in his monotonous life. He had, in fact, become aware of its monotony. The sight of her at Wortham had quickened his pulses, and only this morning he had told himself he should like her to stay always at the farm.

"It would be deuced jolly," he said. "She does cheer the place up, no doubt."

His step-mother's news had given a rude shock to this easy-going laziness. It seemed to him all at once, now

that he thought about it, that he had a better right to Elsie than any one else had.

"What the devil business has any other fellow to think of her?" he said. "I want her myself, and I mean to have her. She 'll be all right as soon as she sees I really care for her."

He stuffed his hands down to the bottom of his trouser-pockets, and began to whistle, "Oft in the stilly night," out of tune. Now that he came to think of it, he had never seen any girl that he liked half so well as Elsie. Peggy Short was n't fit to hold a candle to her—Peggy Short indeed! And he determined that he would go and have a talk with his cousin, and judge for himself. Mrs. Limber was very clever, but, after all, she was only a woman, and women get such unaccountable notions into their heads.

"I don't think Elsie does," he said, as he went through the hall to the house-place behind it. "She 's always so simple, and says things straight out."

He opened the door quietly. There she sat, with half-closed eyes, still dreamily stroking the kitten.

"By Jove! she *is* pretty, and no mistake. The prettiest girl I ever saw in my life."

He stood watching her. He could not bear to spoil the pretty picture; presently the kitten stirred. Elsie looked up and saw her cousin.

"Oh, Dick, how you startled me! How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. Why do you want to know?"

His subdued manner struck her. He had rallied her in the morning on her silence. She did not understand the change.

"I wonder what you were thinking about?" he said; and he placed himself beside her in the cushioned window-seat.

Elsie drew herself into the corner of the seat.

"I was thinking the kitten wanted washing."

"Nonsense, Elsie. Tell me what you were really thinking about?" said Dick, in a persuasive tone.

Then, as Elsie raised her eyes and looked at him frankly and smilingly, he all at once felt shy—the ground he had been so sure of seemed to turn to shifting sand—and he sat open-eyed and open-mouthed waiting for her answer.

"That is what Uncle Edward would call a 'large question,'" she said. "I have been sitting here ever since dinner; why, Dick, I could not possibly recollect all I have thought about in that time."

She looked so pretty and so saucy that Dick felt very much as if he should like to kiss her.

"Come, now," he said, "what was your last thought of all?"

Elsie looked mischievous.

"I remember that. I was so wishing Kitty had a tail like a Persian cat I know at Wortham."

Dick shook his head.

"Then it is not your last thought I want to hear," he said. "I mean what you had in your mind when I first came in. I was just going to speak, and then I saw such a pretty flush come into your face, and it seemed a pity to disturb any thing so pleasant, eh, Elsie?"

His cousin was blushing vividly now, even her temples glowed through the waves of fair hair gathered loosely from them into a knot behind her head.

"How can you be so absurd," she said. "It seems to me you have learned how to tease," but she did not smile.

"Don't be vexed, dear," he said, tenderly. "I would n't vex you for the world. I would spend my whole life in pleasing you, if I only knew the way." He touched her hand, but she drew hers away and looked at him in utter surprise. She considered him such a boy that this speech seemed high-flown and out of place. If he was going to talk like this, she wished he would leave her.

"You do please me, Dick," she said, simply, "quite enough. Now I want to know what you think of Peggy Short?"

"I like her very much," he said. "I think she is a very jolly girl."

"She likes you." She looked at him, and she was puzzled at the loving glance that met hers. "She is so good and sweet, Dick; you can't think what a delightful home she used to have in Devonshire, and she never grumbles at the change."

"Of course she is all right, because she is your friend." Dick began to find that it was harder work to make love to Elsie than he had expected. "And of course she is very fond of you, or she would not write to you so often"—here Elsie blushed again so violently that he grew perplexed; "but I don't want to talk about her, I want to ask you something about yourself."

"About myself!" She felt startled; was Dick a keener observer than she had thought him, and did he suspect her secret? "Oh, Dick, do you not think self is a very dull subject? I would rather hear what has been happening in Blackwater, and whether you have seen Miss Roberts since you came back."

Dick was growing desperate.

"You know I don't care if I never see Miss Roberts again, and no more do you either. Look here, Elsie, do you like Hillside?"

"Of course I do. I should not come here, Dick, unless I liked it; it is a dear old place, and you are all so kind to me."

He wished she would not look so straight at him; if she had blushed and looked confused, there would have been some hope in it, he thought. "I say, Elsie," he blurted out, "should you like it for a home?"

As he spoke, his father's voice was shouting: "Elsie!—where's Elsie?" The door leading into the chicken-yard opened, and Mr. Limber came in.

His good-natured face was beaming with pleasure.

"Oh, here you are, Elsie ; come along, come along, I've got a present for you. Mr. Collingwood has sent over a bantam cock and a couple of hens, pretty little fowl as you ever saw. Come and see if you'll like to have 'em at Wortham."

He hurried Elsie into the yard behind the house, and Dick followed slowly, cursing all the bantams that had ever crowed and cackled, and feeling so cross with his father that he did not trust himself to speak ; he stood by, sulking, with his hands in his pockets, till Mr. Limber asked him to walk with him as far as the croft to see the bull there.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. LIMBER LEARNS THE TRUTH.

MRS. LIMBER was completely puzzled. But, as she delighted in planning and arranging and also in scheming out the affairs of others as well as her own, it was an amusement to her this afternoon to speculate on Elsie's fitful manner. All this morning the young girl had roamed about by herself ; later on she had sat dreaming with the kitten on her knees in the lonely old house-place which no one liked except Mr. Limber ; and now when she came in from the chicken-yard she was restless in her movements, so excited and jerky in her way of talking that her hostess at last began to wonder whether

Dick had been too late after all, for her watchful eyes had seen the pair sitting together in the old window-seat.

Mr. Limber and his son came in at tea-time ; tea at Hillside was a substantial meal with hot buttered cakes of many kinds, of which the farmer ate as heartily as if he were still a boy.

"They call 'em 'sudden death 'in Yorkshire," he said. "All I can say is they 've been a long time killing me."

Dick scarcely touched his tea ; he was longing to find himself alone again with his cousin. He was angry with himself for losing the chance he had had. The next time he would ask Elsie in plain words to marry him. He and Elsie had changed moods again. He sat silent, while she chattered on about her bantams, about Sam Brown, about Mrs. and Miss Roberts whom she had seen in her morning walk ; she rattled on to the delight of her uncle and to the increasing wonder of Mrs. Limber.

Into the midst of her talk came a loud knock at the front door.

Elsie started up ; she was blushing and trembling too.

"Lord, my dear, don't be scared ; it's only Harris," the farmer said. "I saw him yesterday, and he told me he was coming round to show me a sample of that new oil-cake the *Field* has been making a rumpus about. Sit ye down, my dear."

Mr. Limber got up and went out to open the door himself.

His wife frowned with annoyance, but she had already learned that her Richard was incorrigible in his ways.

"I wish Mr. Harris would not come at tea-time. I suppose we shall hear of nothing but this precious oil-cake all the evening"; she looked at Elsie; the girl's eyes were fixed on the door, and she was listening with parted lips and glistening eyes.

Mrs. Limber's eyes grew sharp in their expression; she watched the nervous movement of the girl's hands; Elsie's head drooped as she felt the keen glance fixed on her. Mrs. Limber drew a deep breath, the puzzle was found out; it was no surprise when the sitting-room door opened to hear her husband say:

"A visitor for you, Elsie."

And in came Stephen Brent, looking older and with far more decision and power in his face than it had had when Harriet first met him at Barford Vicarage.

Mrs. Limber grew white, but no one noticed her. Her sight grew dim and her heart seemed to choke her, but by the time that Stephen had shaken hands with Dick, she had recovered herself.

As Mr. Limber introduced the visitor to his wife, Stephen bowed and gave her an impulsive glance—a glance which might have been either admiration or recognition; but her perfect composure, her evident intention to ignore any former acquaintance, reassured him, and he modelled his manner on hers. Then he went up to Elsie, and his eagerness and the girl's downcast blushing

gladness so riveted the attention of both father and son that they had no looks to spare for Mrs. Limber. Besides, both Dick and his father usually found one idea enough to manage at once.

Mrs. Limber busied herself behind the large swinging tea-kettle in making fresh tea, while Stephen Brent seated himself at the table and talked to the farmer.

"I came from Wortham this morning, Miss Neale. Peggy and my aunt sent their best love to you."

"You know Wortham," Mrs. Limber said, quietly; she was no longer pale.

"Oh, yes, very well."

"My dear," said Mr. Limber, "that hot kettle's too near your face; you're quite red; let me move it back a little, 't will spoil your complexion."

"Thank you," she said, "it has caught my cheeks."

"Come and have a smoke in the garden, Mr. Brent," the farmer said, when tea was over. Stephen wanted to be with Elsie; however, he said, Yes, he should like it, and the three men walked through the garden to the summer-house.

There was little color in the garden now; there were scarlet berries in plenty between the windows of the parlor, and some torch lily blossoms flamed among the laurels below the yew hedge; but the herb garden was near the summer-house, and kept it fragrant all the year round.

"And you sail again before long?" the farmer said.

The talk of the tea-table had been chiefly between him and his visitor. Dick had been glum and silent.

"Yes, and then I hope to settle down."

Mr. Limber smoked on in silence ; even he could not help understanding how matters stood. He was sorry for Dick, and for himself, and for Hillside, but here was a fine, manly young fellow, evidently attached to Elsie ; there was nothing to be said against it. In the midst of his disappointment, he wondered with a half smile what his wife would have to say about it.

Mrs. Limber had meanwhile gone into the business-room on the left of the entrance and taken counsel with herself ; she felt she could not stay in the same room with Elsie.

Till now she had had kindly feelings toward her—and indeed the girl's sweet, bright nature always won on those she lived with,—and besides this natural inclination, in the hope of winning so rich a prize for the family, Mrs. Limber had done all she could to be kind to her visitor.

Sometimes when Elsie protested against the extra care bestowed on her comforts and enjoyment, Mrs. Limber could hardly keep from saying : "Take it as a right, you will pay me well for it hereafter."

But now, as she stood beside her husband's desk thinking, her feelings toward Elsie Neale were going through a strange revulsion. Her eyes had told her that Stephen Brent was the girl's lover. Her blood seemed turned to gall.

She had not even looked at Elsie after the men went out. She had hurried to the business-room, and there she stood beside her husband's desk, dry-eyed, with shining eyes and a bright red spot on each cheek, drumming her slender fingers on the worm-eaten leather cover of his great account-book ; anger and hatred were rampant ; she would have liked at that moment to put the broad sea for ever between Stephen and Elsie, reckless of the means. The sight of Stephen had shaken her terribly.

"He is going to see again soon, I gather that much ; there is time to turn round in. If Dick were not such a slow-witted, slow-blooded fool, it would be easier ; he has improved lately, though, and when he takes a thing into his head he is as obstinate as a pig. If I can put him on the right track, it may be managed—may ! it shall be done. Elsie shall not marry any one else."

She stood thinking some minutes longer ; then she went back to the parlor.

Elsie was sitting at the table ; her elbows rested on it, and her clasped hands hid her face between them.

Mrs. Limber felt that she must at once secure Elsie's confidence ; it was a bitter draught, but unless she drained it she should be powerless over the girl's fortunes.

She bent down over Elsie and put her arms gently round her.

"You are very happy now, dear, are you not?" she said, in a soft voice; "I have guessed it all."

Elsie started; then she turned round and hid her face on Mrs. Limber's shoulder.

"Yes, I am so happy," she whispered; she was crying, partly with joy, partly from self-reproach, for she had thought Mrs. Limber, with all her kindness, very unsympathetic.

Mrs. Limber pressed her fondly to her and kissed her.

"Poor, dear child!" She could not say, "I am glad."

"Does Uncle Edward approve of your choice?"

Ever since she had come back to Hillside, Elsie had longed to speak to some one of her newly-found happiness, fully realized indeed only to-day; for when she left Wortham she had not actually promised herself to Stephen Brent. This unexpected sympathy, coming when her heart was so full of pent-up joy, disarmed all prudent reserve. She looked up and wiped her eyes.

"I should like to trust you"—the confiding, simple words made the worldly woman's heart wince with pain,—"only can you keep it from Uncle Limber and from Dick? I do love Uncle Edward so that I can't bear other people to know before he does. He knows Mr. Brent, but he does not know that we—we care about each other. I don't think"—she blushed—"I quite knew it so well till I came here."

"Ah!"—Mrs. Limber tried not to seem startled—"then all those letters you get are not from Miss Short?"

"I thought she wrote very often, dear." She forced a laugh. "How will you manage about your uncle when you go back to Wortham?"

"I shall tell him," said Elsie, frankly, "but I don't want to write it. Of course we could not do any thing sly; but there was nothing to tell before I came away. Uncle Edward has a prejudice against sailors; I have heard him say no one belonging to him shall ever marry a sailor, and Stephen is to sail again very soon. He will be away almost a year; after that he means to give up the sea and settle on shore. And so he thinks he will not speak to Uncle Edward till he comes back, so as to spare him vexation; he says, when he comes back, he will not be a sailor any longer, and he hopes uncle will then be willing to give me to him."

"I see." Mrs. Limber's lips were pressed tightly together.

"But I can't bear even to seem deceitful," said Elsie, earnestly, "and I shall try to persuade Stephen to tell Uncle Edward when he comes back from Scotland."

"I think you will be most unwise," Mrs. Limber said, in a hard voice.

Elsie looked up in surprise at the sudden change from her soft, petting manner.

"Why do you think so?" she said, timidly.

Mrs. Limber had recovered herself. She spoke sweetly again.

"My dear, you are of course the best judge, but it

seems to me your first idea was wise and kind too ; your uncle has been very good to you, and if you can spare him any anxiety or vexation, I think you ought to do it."

Elsie was not half convinced ; she looked at Mrs. Limber, but she had gone to the window.

Presently the maid came to know if the mistress could speak with Molly the dairywoman, and Elsie was left alone.

We seldom give our confidence, rashly, without a mis-giving quickly following. As soon as Mrs. Limber went away, Elsie asked herself what she had done. For the sake of a little present ease to her overcharged heart, she had placed her happiness with Uncle Edward, the love and trust built up in all these years of companionship, in the power of a woman of whom she knew really nothing ; for, simple as Elsie was, she felt that no one could be so completely reticent about herself and her former life as Mrs. Limber was, unless there was something in her nature or her life which she wished to conceal.

She had said to herself more than once that she did not trust her uncle's wife, and now, in a moment of weakness, she had fully trusted her.

A shadow darkened the window. Stephen stood outside looking into the room. Elsie opened the lattice.

"Will you come out with me ?" he said ; and the girl ran up stairs to get her hat.

Stephen was in the parlor when she came down. He took her hand in his and held it.

"At last, my darling," he said ; "I thought I should never get a moment with you."

The color came into Elsie's face as he looked at her ; he saw that her mouth quivered ; the long lashes hid her eyes.

"You see, I have come for the answer to my letter."

Their eyes met. There was no need for words ; he took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"My darling, how happy you have made me !" he whispered.

"I am afraid," he said, presently, "after this evening, I shall not see you again before sailing."

Elsie looked up in dismay, blushing and trembling.

"Not see me again ! I thought you would meet me at Wortham when Uncle Edward comes back from Scotland. I shall go there directly I hear that he is home again."

"That is just what I want to talk about." He stood irresolute ; it was pleasant to be there, holding Elsie to his heart, while her sweet face nestled on his shoulder ; but he shrank from a second meeting with Mrs. Limber. "You will walk with me along the cliffs, won't you, darling, and then we can talk it all over."

As soon as they were clear of the garden, he said,

"I am glad you are going back to Wortham ; it is better for you than staying here."

Elsie looked at him archly.

"Are you jealous of Dick ? You need not be ; he is too lazy to make love to any one,

Stephen put his hand on Elsie's and drew it more closely into his arm,

"I could never be jealous of you, darling; you have the truest eyes a woman ever had. I thought so the first time I saw you."

"Have I? Well, then, let me be true altogether; let me tell Uncle Edward."

He did not answer; he remembered Mrs. Short's words: "Mr. Martin will not let that sweet girl marry if he can help it." He had thought the lawyer's manner to him very ceremonious, and now, on the eve of departure, the vague, shadowy fear of unknown evil which so often seems to wait on parting from those we dearly love stirred Stephen. After all, was not silence safest?

"You are a dear, honest little girl, and I can't bear to contradict you; but sometimes prudence is better than inclination, my Elsie." He gave her such a fond look that the girl felt her will must yield to his, even though it was a trial. "If I could see Mr. Martin, and explain myself fully, it would be different; but I shall be at sea before he comes back. Now, he will say, here's a fellow who skulks off and perhaps never means to keep his word, and he may insist you should give me up."

"If he did, I should tell him I could not."

"I believe that. I could not have a moment's doubt of you, dearest. But why should there be any dispute about me? if nothing is said, Mr. Martin knows nothing. I feel sure he will not be wanting you to marry before I come

back. I would get off this last voyage if I could honorably, but I should feel like a sneak to give it up now. I have not said a word to Peggy or to my aunt ; it is only between you and me, my dearest girl."

Elsie's heart seemed to contract with sudden pain.

"I told Mrs. Limber just now," she said, falteringly.

Stephen looked so very grave that she feared he was angry.

"Do you like Mrs. Limber?" he said, abruptly.

"She is so very kind to me ; my mother could not have been more tender than she was to me just now, when I told her about you."

"Really !—she seemed glad then. Did she ask you if we were engaged?"

"Yes ; and she was so affectionate and nice about it that I could not help telling her ; but perhaps I was silly."

"No, you are never silly, you darling," he said, caressingly. "It is not likely Mrs. Limber will tell your uncle. Why should she? They don't often meet, I suppose?"

"He has never seen her, and indeed she begged me not to tell uncle till you come back."

Stephen's face cleared. He had wronged the woman after all.

"I am sure she is very sharp," he said. "So her opinion is worth having. I really think, dear girl, that if you can bear the trial of keeping this secret for a year, perhaps less, it may be the happiest way, and you have

me to share it with." He stopped, and kissed her, for they were now far from Hillside, on the edge of the lonely cliff. I'm not sure," he whispered, "that I'm not jealous of Uncle Edward."

The girl's eyes gave him his answer; they walked on in happy silence, while the sea broke sullenly on the shingle far below.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOOD-BYE.

IT was growing dusk before Elsie said good-bye to Stephen Brent. She wished to have gone farther with her lover, but he was afraid of leaving her to walk alone so late. At last the farewell was said, and she turned away choking back her tears, but feeling as if every step took her farther from her own heart; it seemed to be drawing her back to Stephen with a force she could hardly withstand.

The grass on the cliffs had turned to a gloomy olive, the sea looked a colorless gray, the sunset had been dull and cloudy so that there was not a tinge of color even in the sky.

When she came in sight of Hillside, the old house appeared transformed into a gloomy prison—she made out Mrs. Limber standing at the gate in the yew hedge, and it seemed to Elsie that here was her jailor,—her freedom had *departed*.

She roused herself from this strange possession and laughed.

"I am absurd," she thought. "I must not give way like this ; how shall I get through a year of separation if I do ? I suppose it is losing one's happiness as soon as one has got it that seems so hard ——"

"You are late, my dear," Mrs. Limber said ; "were you not frightened to be alone ?"

"No" ; then she said, gravely : "You will not tell uncle or Dick of our engagement, will you, because Mr. Brent thinks it best Uncle Edward should not know. I told him you were my only confidante, and he seemed to think we were safe with you."

"Did he ?" Mrs. Limber turned abruptly to the house. "You must not wonder," she went on, "if your Uncle Limber teases you ; but I shall tell him Mr. Brent is one of your admirers, and he must know that a pretty girl like you has plenty."

"But I have not," Elsie said, earnestly.

Mrs. Limber laughed and patted her shoulder.

"That's quite right, dear ; a girl always says that when she's engaged ; but how about Dick ?"

Elsie flushed with annoyance.

"Dick is my cousin," she said, stiffly.

"So he is, poor fellow, all the worse for him—but I know he's very fond of you, Elsie."

Elsie walked on into the house. She did not like this sort of talk, and she utterly disbelieved Mrs. Limber's *assertion*.

She went up to her gloomy bedroom, groping her way along the long dark passage, till she found the door. She sat down in the tall high-backed arm-chair before she lit her candle, to think over in the darkness every word and look of Stephen's.

It had all been so new and strange, so very, very sweet—the girl quivered from head to foot as feelings, whose strength startled her, swept over her.

It was impossible she had said good-bye to her lover. Oh ! she must see him again—she could not live through a year without him. How coldly she had answered his love ! he had taken her by surprise ; well, next time she would make up for it, perhaps, if she were not too shy when the time came. She hid her glowing face in her hands, though there was no one there to see. It seemed to her that she should never get cool enough to face her uncle and Dick. It all seemed like a dream. When she left Wortham, her heart indeed had been filled with Stephen Brent, and she was almost sure he loved her, but she had striven hard to banish the constant thought of him that pursued her ; and then into the midst of her dreamy fits had come one day a letter from Stephen telling her that he loved her, that he had tried not to speak decidedly before going away because she had told him of her uncle's dislike to sailors, but he had found it impossible to go to sea without knowing his fate. In two days he hoped to reach Hillside, and then she would give him his answer ; but if she had no wish to see him—she

must write. She smiled now as she looked back on her dreaming fits ; she had been so unbelieving in the happiness so suddenly offered, and yet she knew that all day long with a throbbing heart she had expected Stephen.

And he had come, and all was blessed certainty ; it had all been so rapid yet so vivid—it had quite changed her life.

Why, it had changed herself ! She was not a bit like the happy, tranquil Elsie who had stayed at Hillside in early spring, and who had found such amusement in teasing Dick. How long ago that time seemed ! She had sat thinking ever so long in the darkness when a knock sounded on the door.

"Please, miss," the maid said, "missis sends word as supper is waiting."

She must go down now ; delay would only arouse observation.

She lighted her candles, and looked at her face. It glowed out of the surrounding darkness, full of tell-tale consciousness.

"There is no use in thinking about it, or about myself at all," she said. "Then perhaps I shall get cool and calm."

She found them all seated. Mrs. Limber gave her a winning smile, but Dick did not glance off his plate.

Her uncle tried to look knowing.

"Well, miss," he said, "better late than never. We

thought you had gone to bed. Did you have a pleasant walk?"

"Don't be silly, Richard; you see that she is tired and hungry. Will you have some pigeon-pie, dear?" Mrs. Limber said.

Elsie hardly knew how to meet her uncle's raillery.

"It is not a very pleasant evening," she said, coolly. "Every thing looks so dull."

"Ha! ha! I suppose it does. That's uncommon well put, Elsie, but it don't take us in. Mr. Brent's a good-looking fellow, my dear. I congratulate you. I'm sorry he could not stay longer, Elsie. He told me he was pressed for time; he might have given you one whole evening, I think."

"Mr. Brent asked me to make his excuses to you, Mrs. Limber," Elsie said, "but he had n't a minute to spare."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Limber, "he was too extravagant of his time with you, hey, Elsie?"

"Richard, why don't you eat your supper?" Mrs. Limber said.

"All right, ma'am. I'll help myself to some more pigeon-pie. I say, Elsie, you know the old saying—how does it go?—Coo'in'—'m—'m—— Oh, yes, I remember, the pigeon-pie put me in mind of it: 'Coo'in' an' billin', like William and Mary on a shillin'."

Dick had been struck by his cousin's cool tone. He began to hope that his fears had been premature, and that she had no real liking for the "free-and-easy

sailor," as he called Stephen. As his father spoke he looked up. Elsie could not help it : to her great annoyance, she was blushing deeply.

There was a howl of pain from under the table. Dick had stretched out his long legs in his sudden anger, and had kicked his dog Pixie, a beautiful brown collie, who never left her master.

In a moment he was bending over the dog, petting it and fondling it, and for the time Elsie was left in peace.

When she went to say good-night to her uncle, he again began to tease, and Elsie looked imploringly at Mrs. Limber.

"Never mind, dear," she said. "He will soon learn how mistaken he is. Don't you take any notice of his nonsense."

Dick stared in some surprise, but the farmer sank back in his chair and laughed heartily.

"Well-done, Harrie !" Then, as Elsie hurried away, he called out after her :

"You do it very well, my dear, but that's all gammon, I know. I know—I've been in the fire myself."

But Mrs. Limber had prepared herself for this attack. She knew her husband well enough to be quite sure that he would never join in trying to make Elsie give up Stephen if he believed they were really engaged lovers.

"How boisterous you are, Richard. Dick is quite shocked. I only know what Elsie told me. There is nothing settled between her and Mr. Brent."

"Then why did he come to see her, hey, Harrie? Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! there's no accountin' for women."

"That's not a question I should have expected from you. Besides, I say nothing about him, though I believe he is a flirt, and Elsie knows it, and that is why she does not care for him."

"Are you sure she does not care for him?" Dick broke in.

There was such strong feeling in her step-son's voice that Mrs. Limber hesitated.

"I can only say what she told me. She begged me to get it out of your heads that there was any thing between her and this Mr. Brent."

"So much the better for you, Dick," his father said.

Dick did not answer, but he looked unbelieving.

Mr. Limber sat silent a little while, busy over his pigeon-pie. After grace, which he always said, he proceeded to light his pipe. At this time Mr. Limber's ideas were never so clear as they were earlier in the day, and even then, as his wife said, they were often hazy. He had so much confidence in Harriet's discernment that he was shaken in his own belief, though he had felt sure Elsie looked very like the real thing. All at once a bright light came to help his doubts.

"Hullo, Harrie," he said, "I've got it. The young fellow came down here to propose, and Elsie has given him the sack, poor chap; and now she's done it she's half sorry—just like a woman. Is that it, Harrie?"

"I expect so. But you forget I have had no chance of a talk with her since she came back from their walk. She went up straight to her room."

She glanced at her step-son. The dark look of misery that had clouded his eyes was gone, and he looked hopeful.

"Good-night, dear Dick," she said; "I shall go to bed. I feel tired to-night."

"That means you are going to have a crack with Elsie," said the farmer—he was unusually lively to-night. "Best be quick about it, or you'll neither of you get much beauty-sleep to speak of. I shall smoke my pipe out, and then turn in."

Mrs. Limber tripped across the house-place, candle in hand. The huge, empty room looked bare and weird in the darkness. There was an ugly story connected with its hearthstone. Beneath this, in the time of Mr. Limber's father, had been found the skeleton of a young woman, and from the jewels on the neck and wrists, it was probable that she had been murdered from revenge or jealousy. Mrs. Limber remembered this story as she crossed the dreary room, her one small candle-flame seeming like a spark in the vast darkness.

"I wonder how Richard would look," she thought, "if I told him I used to love Stephen Brent? Ah! I should n't like to see his face when I told him—my blood seems to chill at the thought of it. A good-natured ignorant man is just the one to strike a woman in his

passion, if he's made jealous." She stood shivering on the landing looking down into the room. "Well,"—she gave a sigh of relief,—“one comfort is that I'm not a weak fool like Elsie. I don't want to share my secrets with any one, and Stephen's not likely to talk—how can he”—she laughed—“when he's out at sea? Ah!” she sighed heavily.

She longed to be in her own room. She had had no time for quiet thought since that terrible moment when Stephen had appeared before her; and ever since she had longed to wreak on some one the agony and the humiliation she had suffered. “I shall not go in to her to-night.”

She was passing along the gallery to her own room when Elsie's door opened softly.

“Will you come in?” she said. “I won't keep you long.”

Mrs. Limber followed Elsie into the dark room, for the tall wax candles on the dressing-table only shed a feeble light just round where they stood.

Elsie pulled the tall high-backed chair forward for her visitor, and Mrs. Limber sat down. She had never hated Elsie as she hated her now as she looked at her. The girl had loosened her long thick hair, and it fell in golden ripples to her waist, shrouding the pale blue wrapper which made her skin look even whiter than usual. The girl's beauty stirred all the evil in Mrs. Limber's nature.

“She shall not have him,” Harriet said to herself.

"No matter what I may have to do, I will prevent it—they shall never meet again."

Just then Elsie looked in her face, and she shrank away from the strange look she saw there.

Mrs. Limber noted the sudden shrinking. She smiled instantly.

"I expect I look frightened," she said. "Just now, coming through the old hall, somehow that old story came into my head, and I was wondering what the murdered woman did to get put there."

"I never like to think of her,"—Elsie shuddered. "I am sure no Limber had any thing to do with the story."

Mrs. Limber shook her head.

"I don't know about that. Every man is cruel at heart, and a brute when his passions are roused. Now, what have you to tell me? for I am very sleepy."

"I only wanted to know about Uncle Limber. I should not like you to deceive him; so, if you wish, please tell him in confidence about Stephen and me. Only I can't bear Dick to know before I tell Uncle Edward."

Mrs. Limber laughed.

"Your uncle is quite satisfied; he has decided that you refused Mr. Brent, and that is why you don't like to be teased; so now I expect he will leave you in peace. You must often come and stay here, dear, and then you will find your secret less irksome."

"How very kind you are!" The girl kissed her

lovingly, but Mrs. Limber did not return her kiss. "Yes, I am afraid I shall find it difficult to keep a secret from Uncle Edward."

"He seems to be a tyrant."

"Oh, no; but we are such friends we tell each other every thing."

"Well, dear, that must have come to an end sooner or later, so you have not much to suffer. Good-night, dear; I am sure you will have no more teasing from your Uncle Limber."

"Good-night, and thank you for all your kindness."

And yet Elsie could not feel that Mrs. Limber's manner was really kind to-night; she would have shrunk from her if she had seen the scowl that spread over her face when she left the room behind her.

Mrs. Limber went on to her own room, and walked straight up to the long mirror between the doors of her spacious wardrobe.

Holding the candle close to her face, she looked at herself attentively; then, retreating, she took in every detail of her supple, rounded figure.

"I am far handsomer than she is, and I have all the charms a man cares for; why, she is skinny compared with me; and what tame, cold eyes she has, little frog. When I think of that glorious fellow's love being wasted on her I feel mad. She shall not have him—I swear it!" She stamped in the vehemence of her excitement.

And then she set down her candle, and walked up and

down the room pondering. All at once she smiled, her face cleared, and her heart felt lightened of half its load.

"He is going to marry her for her money," she thought; "that is why he wishes it kept secret." She sat down to think. "When Uncle Edward comes back to Wortham, it is easy to let him know how his pattern niece has acted in his absence."

So far as her revenge on Elsie was concerned, it was plain sailing; but after that, after she had separated Elsie and Stephen, and perhaps got Elsie married to Dick—after that?—Though if the girl were to lose her uncle's money, this marriage was not desirable.

She sat still, her face growing sadder and sadder; she wondered whether, if she had never seen Stephen Brent, she could have been happy with Mr. Limber.

Her head bowed down involuntarily, and she clasped her hand over her eyes.

"It's too late now, too late," she moaned; "and yet, whatever I do, I do well; so I suppose, if I'd been brought up good like Elsie, I should have had an easy life like hers, and never wanted what was not sent me."

She began to walk up and down again, for her agitation made repose irksome.

"If Elsie were dead, perhaps—then I could give him up, and be a good and loving wife. I know well I can do any thing I choose to do; but, when I have been baulked all my life, to have this last joy taken from me, is

more than I can bear. . . . He may love Elsie now, though I believe her money is the chief attraction ; but he loved me once, when he first saw me at Barford, I 'm sure he did ; I believe it was only that meddling aunt of his that separated us. Poor little Peggy was willing enough, and I might have been kinder to her ; but clergymen's wives are all alike ; they spend their lives at the bottom of a teacup, and fancy they are on the top of a hill—any thing that they never heard of or never met with is safe to be wrong. Mrs. Short couldn't bear me because she herself was dowdy. Even now it makes me laugh to think how her skirts hung, poor conceited fool."

But the sounds of barring and bolting below told her that her husband's pipe was smoked out, and that he was fastening the hall-door preparatory to coming up stairs, and with a deep sigh she began to brush out her silky black hair.

BOOK THIRD.

CHAPTER I.

THE SQUIRE'S WIFE.

MRS. LIMBER'S general dislike to clergymen's wives had increased since she came to Hillside. Her husband had been very liberal both to the church and to the poor, and he was greatly respected.

Both Mrs. Collingwood, the wife of the squire, and Mrs. Roberts, the parson's wife, had called on the new mistress of Hillside.

But Mrs. Limber found Mrs. Roberts' patronage insufferable when she was asked to dine at the parsonage. Mrs. Roberts, her daughter, and the one other lady among the guests, talked together after dinner, and she, with a chance word bestowed on her, was left to amuse herself as she pleased.

Mrs. Limber did not complain to her husband of this neglect ; for worlds she would not have had him suppose that her charms were not as potent with regard to others as he considered them to be. She consoled herself by dressing much better than either Mrs. Roberts or her

daughter could ever have done, even if they had had the means afforded by the handsome dress allowance which the farmer gave his wife ; and, when the party from the vicarage came to a return dinner, Mrs. Limber had the triumph of sending the vicar's wife home thoroughly dissatisfied with her own cook and her own ideas of arranging and decorating a dinner-table.

Since then Mrs. Roberts had seldom called at the farm-house ; but now and then she said to her intimate friends that "it was singular that a person of whom no one knew any thing should have so many ideas on things." For her part, she thought it probable Mrs. Limber had been on the stage, and, "now that people in London had grown so careless as to whom they invited, it was quite possible Mrs. Limber might have been asked to good houses, just out of curiosity to see her, you know, and she had picked up ideas."

But she did not say this either to her husband or to the squire's wife, young Mrs. Collingwood, who had "a great soul," and wore loose wrapping gowns and a large flapping hat, and hated gossip and every thing small or petty, or which trammelled and hindered "the growth of intellect."

On the afternoon of the day after Stephen Brent's visit, Mrs. Limber was in her husband's business-room, casting up her week's accounts. Elsie had gone to the house-place, where she felt sure of being undisturbed, for Dick and his father had ridden into Blackwater.

A knock at the front door disturbed Mrs. Limber's arithmetic, and she opened the door of the business-room to hear who the visitor was.

"Is Mrs. Limber at home?" said Mrs. Collingwood; and then Miss Roberts' jerky voice made itself heard, asking for Miss Neale. "Will you say we have come to call on her?"

Emphasis on the last pronoun made Mrs. Limber smile; but when the maid came and gave the message, she went into the drawing-room and greeted her visitors.

Mrs. Collingwood noticed, as she had noticed before, the ease and self-possession of Mrs. Limber's manner, and she recognized at once that she was talking to a woman of superior abilities, but Miss Roberts was obtuse and arrogant—a farmer's wife to her was a farmer's wife, "and nothing more"; a person who should be thankful for the notice of her superiors, and thankful for the notice they gave or the hints she might glean from them; and Mrs. Limber's style was quite unsuited to her position, quite absurd, though even Miss Roberts could not deny to herself that the farmer's wife was dressed as simply as any "real lady" could wish to be.

"I don't understand it," she had said to her mother. "It's quite incongruous."

"We came to see your niece," she now said to Mrs. Limber. "I saw her in church last Sunday. She looks old enough to be your sister."

But this was not said as a compliment. Miss Roberts spoke in a stand-and-deliver fashion, as much as to say : "Perhaps she is your sister."

Mrs. Limber only smiled and turned to Mrs. Collingwood. She quite took the measure of her visitor, and she felt that she could only be put down by side hits.

"My niece was wishing to see you, Mrs. Collingwood. She met you driving a few days ago, and she said you reminded her of some picture she had seen."

"Really." Mrs. Collingwood looked interested. "Perhaps she saw my portrait in the Royal Academy last year. It was called 'A Friend of Progress.'"

"Ah, that is a beautiful picture," Miss Roberts remarked. "But then, perhaps the painter could not help himself. He had only to copy what he saw, you know."

Mrs. Limber observed that Miss Roberts could speak sweetly when she chose.

Elsie's entrance here gave a new turn to the talk. Mrs. Collingwood looked at the girl earnestly out of her large blue eyes. It seemed to her that here was an untrammelled soul, a fellow-being with whom she could hold communion ; "one who would not shrink from climbing to the hill-tops, spite of their loneliness," so as to escape the petty heart-wearing frivolity that went on in the common herd.

Miss Roberts was more demonstrative, though she saw in Elsie a pretty girl, much simpler looking than her aunt.

"I have a message to you from mamma, Miss Neale. She asked me to say she cannot come to call on you, because she has sprained her ankle, but she will be pleased to see you if you will call at the parsonage." She spoke pompously, and Elsie understood that an honor had been conferred upon her.

"Thank you, I shall be happy to call," Elsie said; she felt amused.

Mrs. Limber heard and understood that she was purposely left out of the invitation, but she went on talking to Mrs. Collingwood.

"I should like to see your picture," she said; "where is it now?"

"We have it at the Hall. Would you really like to see it? Perhaps you are not a good walker," and then she added: "Would you like me to send the pony carriage for you and Miss Neale to-morrow? and then perhaps you would let me show you our pictures—not much to a Londoner, I dare say, but some of them are very old family portraits and old masters."

Mrs. Limber's eyes lighted up with pleasure in spite of herself.

"You are very kind." Then, breaking into Elsie's talk with Miss Roberts, she repeated Mrs. Collingwood's invitation.

Miss Roberts raised her eyebrows.

"You paint, Miss Neale? Ah! you must come mamma's morning-room. I have painted the

walls all round ; there are the Muses on one side, and the Fates and Furies and Hesperides on the other. I got the maids to stand, and created the faces myself ; then, for a change, I have done the Prodigal Son at the end of the room, and one of the Roman Sibyls on each side of the looking-glass. I had some trouble in finding a model for a prodigal ; the Sibyls were easier. It is quite surprising how the myths and realities harmonize ; you can hardly tell one from the other."

"That must be so satisfactory, but I can believe it," said Mrs. Limber, gravely. Mrs. Collingwood stared, but she supposed that the farmer's wife meant what she said.

"Oh, Mrs. Limber," said Miss Roberts, "I knew I wanted to talk to you about something. It's about the house-place. It's the finest room in this part of the country," she said to the squire's wife, "and there's a horrible legend ; may I show it to Mrs. Collingwood?"

"Certainly ; shall we go there?" and Mrs. Limber opened the drawing-room door for her guests, and led the way to the door at the end of the hall.

This opened into the middle of the house-place, just opposite the vast fire-place ; Mrs. Collingwood greatly admired the old recessed window, with its lozenge-paned casement, and the mighty, carved beams of the ceiling. Then she was shown the wide-open hearth, with its dogs, and listened with deep interest to the grim story of its hearthstone.

"Dear me!" Miss Roberts sighed, "I suppose there must always be a blazing fire on the old hearth even in summer-time. You know, till you came, Mrs. Limber, this was the family sitting-room."

"So I hear," and Mrs. Limber smiled pleasantly at her visitor.

"Do you know," Miss Roberts went on, "mamma has thought of such a capital plan for utilizing this old room—that is, of course, if you approve, and if you are quite sure you don't wish to go back to the old ways."

"I am quite sure." Though Mrs. Limber still smiled, there was a stiffness in her voice which made her visitor more certain than ever that she was "uppish" in her notions.

Mrs. Collingwood had walked to the end of the house-place with Elsie, and was admiring the square staircase.

"I am sure you 'll not mind." Miss Roberts spoke in a lower voice now. "Mamma has been long wanting to train some of the upper school-girls as cooks and good servants; but we have no room at the parsonage, and of course there is always so much for cook to do, a late dinner, and so on. You dine early, I know, and mamma thinks it would be so very nice if you would lend this room, and she would spare cook once a month to give 'essons in cookery, and then, if you like, your cook can give a lesson too, and do the teaching on other days. Limber said, if you would like to superintend yourself, old enough would not think of sending—of—of—interfering which way shall it be?"

Mrs. Limber had pressed her lips tightly, and the pupils of her dark eyes had become so small that the whole eye seemed contracted. Now her lips parted, and she smiled so genially, so benignantly, that Miss Roberts felt puzzled. She had expected a little resistance to her proposal. After all, she had been wrong in calling this woman, "uppish."

"This is Mr. Limber's room," she said; "I am afraid he would not like the idea of a school here. I dare say he will help to build you a room, and pay for a qualified teacher; but these things are expensive. My cook requires very high wages as it is, and I should not like to ask her to do extra work for nothing; I am afraid she would charge you quite as much as a teacher would for the extra service required of her. I could not ask her to do it for nothing. You would not care to teach yourself——"

"I!" Miss Roberts' face was comic with disgust. "I scarcely ever go into the kitchen; I really don't know a frying-pan from a gridiron. What use should I be?"

"You would be of just the same use that I should be," said Mrs. Limber, with a sweet smile. "I advise you to take lessons of the teacher when she arrives, and then you will be able to dispense with her services, and save her salary."

Miss Roberts felt beaten, but she persevered.

"Then you will not lend us the room?" she said.
"dare say the rest could be managed."

"I'm afraid we can't spare it," Mrs. Limber said. "One gets selfish, you know, and likes to keep one's house for one's self. I dare say you feel as we do. You would not like a sewing-class in your morning-room every day."

"Of course not ; but I thought this old place was not used. Mrs. Collingwood," she raised her voice, and it sounded angry, "I am quite ready to go if you are."

Mrs. Collingwood came forward with Elsie, and Miss Roberts had the annoyance of hearing the invitation for to-morrow repeated with a warmth of manner which showed that the squire's wife was not paying a mere compliment.

CHAPTER II.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE.

THE squire's wife sent the pony carriage for Mrs. Limber and Elsie to bring them to Trant Hall. On their arrival there they were introduced by Mrs. Collingwood to the portrait of "The Friend of Progress," and to the other pictures, many of which were very remarkable. Elsie was delighted with the fine old portraits of the squire's ancestors.

Mrs. Collingwood behaved very civilly to Mrs. Limber ; she clearly showed that she had taken a great fancy to her. Elsie, addressing most of her conversation to the young squire, who was standing by, said, "The squire came in while they were looking at the

picture.

pictures. Like Mr. Limber, he had married a woman much younger than himself. He was a portly, jovial-natured man, with a large fund of information on most subjects. Mrs. Limber's good looks and amusing observations attracted him, and he paid her a good deal of attention. She brightened up at this ; her vanity was appeased, and she felt in an excellent humor. Elsie, too, was in much better spirits than she had been since her lover had said good-bye to her. So they were quite a merry party.

On the drive home Mrs. Limber was her old self with Elsie, and made the girl laugh heartily at some of the sharp, quaint remarks she made in drawing a contrast between her visits to the squire's and to the parson's ; but she whispered these *sotto voce*, so that the groom who drove them should not hear.

But this agreeable state of mind toward Elsie did not last more than a day or two. Gnawing jealousy again took possession of Mrs. Limber, and, though she strove against the passion, it visibly affected her manner. The girl could not help seeing the change, and she wondered what she had done to cause it.

After the first few days Mr. Limber did not tease Elsie any more about Stephen Brent, for he saw that it gave her pain. It need hardly be said that Mrs. Limber did not tell her husband of the engagement, but, nevertheless, Mr. Limber by degrees went back to his original decision that "they had made it all right and comfortable."

their walk. His kind heart felt for Elsie. It seemed to him hard that she had had to part so immediately from her lover, and he tried in a hundred ways to show her how much he sympathized with her. He was forever devising some little thing to give her pleasure. Elsie was deeply touched by the simple proofs of the kind old farmer's affection, and her heart went out to him more lovingly than ever. The friendship between them added to Mrs. Limber's anger, but at the same time her determination that Elsie should become her step-son's wife grew stronger.

Dick was kind and civil when they met, but he said little to his cousin, and indeed avoided her as much as possible.

Elsie soon lost her gayety ; though the certainty of Stephen's love was delicious to dwell upon, their sudden separation before they had barely sipped the cup of happiness, and the anxiety she felt at his going to sea for so long, combined to make her heavy-hearted. Still it was a frequent joy as she sat alone to recall his last looks and words, to close her eyes and to feel his arm steal round her once more, while his warm breath was upon her cheek. These were dear delights that absence could not take away ; they encompassed her like an exquisite atmosphere.

Mrs. Limber more than once professed to be full of sympathy with her at the separation from her lover, but old enmities were forced ; and simple and unsuspecting as

Elsie was, she could feel there was not the ring of truth in them.

So the days wore on. She had been a fortnight at Hillside, and she was thinking of writing to her uncle to say that she would like to go back to Wortham as soon as he returned home, when all her plans were upset by the receipt of a letter from Mr. Martin.

"MY DEAREST ELSIE :

"I have just returned from Scotland, having concluded my business there satisfactorily. Every thing, thanks to Mr. Gordon, has gone on here quite right. And now I have a piece of news for you which will surprise you. I am going to start for America in a few days. A most important matter of business has to be arranged there for one of my clients. I thought at first of sending Mr. Gordon to carry it through, but as I have often wished to see the States, I have now arranged to go myself. I suppose I shall be away two or three months.

"In order that Mr. Gordon may be on the spot for business, I have asked him to take up his abode in this house during my absence. And, as you seem to be comfortable and happy where you are, I have written to Mrs. Limber to ask that you may remain at Hillside till my return. I hope, my dearest Elsie, you will not mind doing this, as I think it is the best arrangement that can be made for you.

"I should dearly like to see you before I go,"

time is so very short, I will not give you the trouble of coming and returning.

"God bless you, my dearest child. I shall have plenty to tell you when we meet.


"Your most affectionate uncle,

"EDWARD MARTIN."

This news was a surprise and a disappointment to Elsie. She had been looking forward to seeing her uncle and Peggy again; in spite of Mr. Limber's kindness, and the attention shown her by the squire's wife, she was not happy at Hillside. But she had no choice offered her, and, moreover, it was her plain duty to put aside inclination and obey her uncle, and she wrote at once to say she was willing to do as he wished. Mrs. Limber wrote by the same post to say they would be delighted to keep Elsie at the farm.

The day after this, Elsie received a letter from her lover—not the first by many he had written to her since they parted. It was full of all those tender confidences which are only interesting to the recipient, but it also gave her a piece of news which reconciled her more than any thing else to remaining at Hillside. Stephen told her that by the time she got his letter he should be once more afloat.

This news came upon her almost with the force of a Limb. They were indeed parted; there was no more old eno of seeing him for perhaps twelve long weary
for though he had said, when he bade her fare-



well, he should be unable to see her again before he started, hope had lingered as usual, and she had often said to herself : " He may come again. Some delay may give him time."

Presently the thought came to her : " At Hillside I shall be close to the sea which bears my darling on its bosom," and there was comfort in the thought.

At the time when Dick came from Wortham, and spoke of Peggy Short to Mrs. Limber, she, with her usual caution, had not pursued the subject ; but afterward, incidentally, and at various times, she had questioned him about the Shorts, and she had found out their exact position. She felt that she must meet Peggy sooner or later, and the strained situation now between her and Elsie made her think that a third person—a girl she used to like—would probably smooth matters in the house ; she would ask Peggy to Hillside. There would be, too, a certain satisfaction in showing to her former pupil the very comfortable circumstances in which she had placed herself by her marriage with Mr. Limber. It would be pleasant to her to be kind to and to patronize Peggy Short.

" After all, I did like the silly little thing, and she was very fond of me," she thought. " She was never disagreeable about Stephen."

" Elsie," she said one day, " Dick tells me that you^{an} know a mother and daughter of the name of Short Wortham."

"Yes, they are great friends of mine."

"It is curious—I am sure I knew them formerly, when they lived at Barford. I liked Peggy, the daughter—she was a nice little thing; her father was vicar."

"Peggy is my dearest friend," Elsie said.

"I will ask her here, if you like," said Mrs. Limber.

"Will you? That would be indeed delightful for me," Elsie said, eagerly; then, thinking this sounded rather selfish, she added: "The change would be very good for Peggy, as I dare say you know they have only a small income now."

"I suppose so. I shall not ask Mrs. Short—I never cared for her much; she is what I call a managing woman."

In her heart Mrs. Limber hated Peggy's mother; she was sure, but for her, she might now be Stephen Brent's wife.

Elsie laughed.

"Poor Mrs. Short! you are severe on her; perhaps she is fond of having her own way, but she is so pleasant about it, and she is so kind, that one cannot help liking her. She and Uncle Edward are great friends. I think, if any woman would tempt him to marry, Mrs. Short would."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Limber; "is there any chance
Limb, such a thing?"

old end looked so alarmed that Elsie laughed.

"How unlikely things have happened," she said.

At first Mrs. Short opposed her daughter going to Hill-side. She said she had never liked or trusted Harriet Gray, and there was no reason, because she had changed her name, that she had changed her nature. She considered that "her conduct to Steenie was very forward—though your poor father never would see it"; and also she thought that Harriet had behaved in an ungrateful and worldly way toward them. "If we had still been well off, my dear, we should have heard of her before now."

Peggy acknowledged the truth of this; she too had felt her friend's neglect; but her nature was sweet and forgiving.

"I think it would be unkind to Elsie to refuse. You see from her letter how much she hopes I shall go."

Peggy knew this would be the all-prevailing argument with her mother; for Mrs. Short doted on Elsie.

And, after a little more talk, it was settled that Peggy should accept Mrs. Limber's invitation.

Peggy told herself that the excitement she felt at the thought of this visit was entirely caused by her wish to see her friend, but certainly she thought a good deal more about Dick Limber than she cared to own to herself.

She did not know how far matters had progressed between Stephen and Elsie, but she was quite sure there was no tie between Dick and his cousin; so that, at any rate, she was free to flirt with him as much as she pleased. She was sure to like the dear old farmer; Elsie

to be fond of him ; and as to Harriet—well, they would no doubt soon be good friends again.

There was only one drawback ; it seemed selfish to go away and enjoy herself and leave her mother alone.

But Mrs. Short would not hear of this impediment.

“I shall get on capitally, my dear, and think how much you will have to tell me when you come home,” she said ; “you will bring back some sea-breezes and quite a change of thought into our monotonous life.”

CHAPTER III.

PEGGY AT THE FARM.

WHEN Peggy arrived at Hillside, Mrs. Limber met her at the hall-door and kissed her as if she was the dearest friend she had.

“My dear Peggy, this is delightful. How well you are looking ! I thought we were never going to meet again. How is your mamma ?” Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on : “But you must be tired, my dear child ; you will like some tea. Come into the drawing-room ; it’s all ready.” And she put her arm round Peggy’s waist and took her into the room.

“How pretty it all is !” said Peggy, looking round. Lim. “Take off your cloak and hat. There, now you’ll be old comfortable. I’ve often longed to write to you, my dear and then I thought, ‘She will have forgotten all

about such an insignificant person as I am,' and so on, and I put it off ; but, you naughty child, why did *you* not write to me ? ”

“ Just for the same reason as yours,” Peggy said, with a merry laugh.

“ You are the same saucy child as ever,” Mrs. Limber said, patting her cheek. “ Ah ! here comes Elsie.”

The two girls flew at each other, and kissed and hugged and said all the pretty things girls say under such circumstances.

Mrs. Limber had been very particular about her tea arrangements on this occasion. She had done her utmost to impress Peggy ; and the tea-table, with its pretty china, flowers, fruit, and cakes, presented a much more refined appearance than is generally seen in a farmhouse. And the trio of women who now seated themselves at the table, all so different and yet all remarkable for their looks, completed a picture that an artist would have longed to paint.

Mrs. Limber was rarely willing to discover beauty in another woman, but she was surprised at the change in Peggy ; she could not help seeing that the pretty school-girl had developed into a really charming creature. Her rosy cheeks and cherry-red, mutinous lips, her bright, saucy eyes, her soft, shining, light brown hair, which grew ruffly about her temples, and her round, graceful figure, made up an irresistible whole.

“ How is Mr. Limber ? ” Peggy asked.

"Quite well, thank you. He and Dick will be in presently ; they had to go on business some distance off this afternoon."

Peggy was ashamed of the tell-tale blood that dyed her face with rosy color at the mention of Dick Limber's name.

Mrs. Limber was pouring out the tea, and did not see the blush ; but Elsie noted it and the eyes veiled by the long lashes, with satisfaction, and she thought what a sweet, dainty little creature Peggy looked. It was not possible when her cousin Dick saw her every day that he could hold out against her charms.

"What a charming view you have from the window !" Peggy said, turning her head in that direction. "I don't wonder at your liking to be here, Elsie ; it is quite delightful, and the air is so delicious. Oh ! I do love to be near the sea."

"It is a capital house," Mrs. Limber said ; "but I hope to make it much better before I have done ; it had been sadly neglected before I came ; there had been no mistress for several years."

"The Fanny Limber at our school was Mr. Limber's daughter, was she not ?" Peggy said.

"Yes,"—something in the tone of voice and in the look that accompanied it showed Peggy that her school-life was a subject Mrs. Limber did not wish alluded to.

Just then the drawing-room door opened, and Mr. Limber and Dick came in. The farmer shook hands heartily with Peggy.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance. You 'll excuse me, my dear young lady, that I was n't at home to welcome you, but me and Dick had to go far afield this afternoon; business must sometimes go before pleasure, even when a pretty young lady 's in the case," he said, smiling sweetly at Peggy. "But Harrie 's made you welcome, I know—she 's good for us both at those sort o' things, ain't you, ma'am?"

"I hope you 're well, Miss Short," Dick said, shyly, as he took the blushing girl's little hand into his large one. "And how 's Mrs. Short?"

"Mamma is quite well, thank you, and she sent you her kind regards," Peggy said, with a half-coquettish smile at him. "Is this the wonderful dog you told me about?" and she stooped to pat the collie rather timidly.

"Yes; is n't she a beauty? Don't be afraid to pat her; she 's as gentle as a lamb."

Pixie wagged her tail and raised herself on her hind legs against Peggy, looking confidentially into her face.

"There," said Dick, triumphantly, "Pixie 's made friends with you already."

"She 's a very large Pixie. I wonder you did n't call her Juno," Peggy said, saucily.

"Give me a cup o' tea, my dear; I'm as thirsty as a horse," Mr. Limber said, seating himself beside his wife. "You see, Miss Short, I keep to the old fashion o' large cups," he went on, as he took a cup of tea from his wife.

"Mrs. Limber's changed most things, and for the better, no doubt, but she can't get me out o' my large cups o' tea," and he laughed heartily. He nearly emptied his cup at a draught; then he said; "You're very welcome to Hillside, my dear; it ain't very strong stuff to drink it in, but the heart goes with it, and I hope you'll stay as long as you like us."

Tea was over, and the two girls were together in Peggy's bedroom.

"Of course you have not heard from your uncle?" Peggy said; "there has not been time."

"No. I don't expect a letter for another week or so."

"It is curious," Peggy went on, "that Steenie and your uncle should be travelling at the same time."

"Yes."

Elsie hastily changed the subject. She dreaded Peggy's sharp wits, and she began to ask questions about all her Wortham acquaintances.

Peggy felt disappointed. In her heart she called Stephen "a bashful muff" for not having made sure of Elsie. But she was soon absorbed in satisfying her friend's questions, and it was growing dusk when the two girls made their appearance downstairs.

Dick was in the hall. He had been loitering about for some time, going in and out of the house in an aimless way, attended by Pixie.

"Oh, here you are at last!" he said, rather sulkily. "I thought, Elsie, you promised to go out for a walk. It *will soon be dark.*"

"Have we been long, Dick?" Elsie said, demurely.
 "We are quite ready, don't you see, with our hats on."

"Don't you know, Mr. Limber, unpacking is a very difficult and tedious thing?" Peggy said, with a saucy smile, and giving Elsie a covert squeeze.

Her high spirits were well inclined to run away with her.

"I always find packing is the trouble," Dick said, looking at her admiringly. "I can get the things out of my portmanteau fast enough, getting 'em in's the bother. I expect you've been unpacking a lot of words as well."

Peggy looked at him mischievously, and they both burst into a laugh.

"I think the outside of the house and this garden so quaint and pretty," Peggy said, as they were going down the paved path to the yewhedge. She and Dick were first, Elsie following. "It's quite an ideal farmhouse. You were born here, Mr. Limber, were you not?"

"Yes; and I dare say I shall die here. Hillside has been in our family for years."

"How nice!" sighed Peggy, thinking of her Barford home.

"What, for me to die?" said Dick, opening his big blue eyes till they looked immense.

"No, no," said Peggy, laughing. "I was thinking how nice it is to have a home that can't be taken from you. When papa died we had to leave our dear old home."

"Oh, I see; I'm so sorry," Dick said. "I always pity

parsons' wives and daughters because of that. But which way shall we go?"

They were outside the yewhedge in the road.

"Oh, to the sea, please. Sha'n't we, Elsie?"

"Yes, dear," Elsie said.

She had purposely been keeping in the background.

"I think you said, Miss Short, when I was at Wortham, that you were very fond of the sea," Dick observed, as they walked along.

"Yes, I love the sea," the girl said, enthusiastically, "but I have not seen much of it."

"Well, you'll get enough of it here, if you go walks with Elsie. She does n't seem to care for any thing else now," Dick said, rather savagely.

"Oh! Dick, you are ungrateful," Elsie said. "Why, only last night I took a long walk with you inland."

"Yes, but I knew you wanted to be by the sea all the time, of course I knew that."

"I did not say so."

"Oh, but I was sure you did. You kept looking back at the sea."

"I am afraid you are very difficult to please, Mr. Limber," Peggy said, laughing. "I shall have to take care which way I look."

Dick felt inclined to say when he caught her merry glance, "Always look at me, and I shall be satisfied," but his courage failed, and he only said, looking across at Elsie as they walked, all three abreast :

"I'm not at all difficult to please, when people don't rub me the wrong way."

"I have not forgotten," Peggy said, "how hard you were upon me one day at Wortham about wild flowers."

"Fancy your remembering that, Miss Short!" Dick said; he looked greatly pleased. "Now, if you look just over the cliff's edge, near the flag-staff, you'll find a sort of golden flower I never saw anywhere else. Shall we go and look for 'em now?"

"Yes, please; but I'm not so crazy about flowers as Elsie is, you know, so don't take any trouble, please."

"To begin with, there's no trouble, and even if there were——"

Peggy shook her head.

"Ah, take care; you will never succeed in persuading me you like trouble."

"Even then," Dick said, in a low voice, "wouldn't it be pleasant to do what one does n't like, to please you?"

Meanwhile Mrs. Limber from an upper window watched the three go out; she watched them with a frown till they were lost to sight; she saw, though she could not distinguish their faces, that Peggy and Dick were having most of the talk.

"She's a regular flirt," she thought—"just what I expected she would be. She and Dick must not be much together. A fellow is sure to like a girl

who will do most of the running for him. There's no doubt the saucy little monkey is very pretty. I'm not sure that it was not a false move to have her here ; it would never do for Dick to be wanting to marry her. What did he say to me once ? ' I should not care if a girl was as poor as a church mouse, if I liked her.' Oh, he has managed all through with Elsie like a self-willed fool ! If he had only got her to engage herself to him before she met—Stephen"—a spasm of pain passed over her beautiful face—"all would have been safe ; she is too high-principled to have broken her word to Dick, even if she liked the other better I wonder where he is now?—safe, I hope. Glorious fellow ! how noble and good of him—it was to keep his word to me ! Who could have told he had ever seen me before ? ”

She paused. She had seated herself in a chair away from the window, her elbow on her knee, her cheek resting in her hand ; her eyes, full of misery, were fixed on the opposite wall.

"Harrie, Harrie, where are you ?" sounded up from below, in her husband's loud, jovial voice.

She started up and went to the door of the room.

"I am here," she called out.

"Come down, my pet. Here 's Sam Brown got a present for you."

"I say, Molly," Sam Brown said to his wife, a week 'ter Peggy's arrival at Hillside, as they sat at tea, "I'm

blessed if our Measter Dick ain't a lucky young Turk. I 'ze just seed him a-walkin' with they two sweet creatures, Miss Elsie and Miss Peggy, a-carryin' on just for all like a lord."

"My mercy, Sam, you don't say so!"

"Seems to me, the way he goes on 's loike the old tale o' the donkey 'twixt two bundles o' hay."

"Well, I never! that ain't a compliment, Sam, to neather o' the three."

"My dear soul, 't ain't to be taken by the sound, on'y by the sense; my meanin' is, 't will be precious hard for our Measter Dick to pick which on 'em he 'll have. Don't ye see, Molly?"

"Supposin'," said Molly, contemptuously, with her mouth full of bread and butter, "neather one nor t' other takes to our Measter Dick—what then, Sam?"

"Oh, that 's all my eye, Molly; a foine young chap like our Measter Dick—hullo, young Jim," he cried to their first-born, the chubby youngster of three years old was getting blue in the face, "ye 'll choke yerself if ye puts bits loike that i' yer mouth. Keep an eye on him, Molly. Where was I? Well, I say a foine young chap like our Measter Dick 's bound to please one or t' other on 'em; an' I thinks 't is Miss Peggy 'll have him if he axes her. My! don't she look lovin' at him!"

"Miss Peggy!—why, you told me a while ago Miss Elsie was for him."

"Well, I 'm none so sure on it now," Sam said, shaking

his head judicially, and setting an infamous example to his son by putting some two inches of bread and butter in his mouth. "We all on us makes mistakes, Molly, my girl, some o' one kind, some o' t' other. I reckon the Lord Chancellor hisself ain't allays like gospel in what he do say."

"Don't you think, Sam, the Measter'd like Miss Elsie to marry our Measter Dick?"

"Ah, you're right there, Molly. My word, he does set store by her."

"An' what about the Missus?"

Sam nodded sagaciously, and put his finger on his nose.

"The Missus knows what she wants, Molly, but devil another does, an' that 's about the size of it."

CHAPTER IV.

AN AFTERNOON WALK.

WHEN Peggy Short had been three or four days at Hillside, Mrs. Limber's manner toward her changed; she did not try to make things pleasant to her visitor—indeed, she sometimes treated her in such a slighting, patronizing fashion that the young maiden swelled with anger, and she found it hard work to restrain her tongue from sharp sayings. Peggy's disenchantment with her old friend was sudden but complete, and she

found it difficult to believe that she had ever loved Harriet Gray, and looked on her as perfection in the old school-days.

Mrs. Limber's unkindness to the young girl was caused by her step-son's undisguised admiration for the coquetish Peggy, who took Dick, as it were, at the rebound. Stung by mortified pride after Stephen Brent's visit to the farm, and quite unconvinced by his step-mother's assertions that the young sailor had not been successful in the object of his visit, he determined to "pay Elsie out," as he phrased it to himself. He flirted to the best of his ability with the charming Peggy, though it must be owned his way of flirting was in its character rather like the movements of a young Flanders horse. Still Dick had gained much in quickness of observation and development of intellect since Elsie first came to the farm, and his contests in words with Peggy further helped to remove a great deal of what Mrs. Limber had mentally termed his "loutishness."

"I want you girls to take a walk with me," Dick said one afternoon. "Elsie, I want to show Miss Short that splendid view from Buckhurst Hill."

"Oh, that will be delightful!" said Peggy.

"I have rather a headache, Dick," Elsie said, "but you can go without me, can you not?"

There was really very slight foundation for the headache; Elsie thought she would give them the chance of being together.

"Oh,"—Peggy looked disappointed,—"I'm so sorry, dear; don't you think the air would do you good?" the artful maiden added, hardly owning to herself the answer she wished Elsie to make.

"No, I do not, thank you, and I have a letter I want to finish, so you two had better be off, and then you will be back in time for tea."

"We will take Pixie with us," said Peggy, demurely, as if she thought the collie's escort would give due propriety to the walk.

It was a lovely spring afternoon; there was a pleasant breeze blowing from the sea, most exhilarating to the spirits, and the two started for their walk with almost the glee of a boy and girl. The collie went with them, and expressed her delight by joyful barks and bounds. The gentle creature had taken a great fancy to Peggy, and made as great a fuss over her as she did over her master.

Dick thought his companion looked very charming in her straw hat and blue ribbon.

"Where is Mrs. Limber?" said Peggy, when they got clear of the farm.

"She has gone to do some shopping in Blackwater," Dick said, laughing; "our walk lies in the opposite direction. Are you sorry?"

They looked at one another, and they both burst out laughing.

But although Mrs. Limber did not see Peggy and Dick start for their walk, Sam Brown, who was just then busy

in the farm-yard, caught sight of them. His half-closed eyes twinkled, and he looked after the pair for several minutes, his fine teeth gradually showing almost from ear to ear.

"Eh, my word ! where 's Miss Elsie ? Thay two are goin' to have it all their own way this afternoon. Whew ! what 'ud the Missus say to that ? My !"

The way was inland, and "they two" soon came to a pleasant road, bordered by low banks and hedges a-top. Here such early wild flowers as will grow near the sea sprinkled the banks and ditches.

"How lovely those primroses are," said Peggy, "and that dear little green flower !"

"Shall I gather you some ?"

"Oh, yes, please, do."

In a few minutes Dick had gathered a handful of primroses and their crinkled green leaves, also some bunches of ladies'-mantle he had come across.

Peggy received them with a winning smile.

"Thank you. Oh, they are pretty !—you told me there were only twisted sort of things about here. Dear me !" with a little sigh, "how long ago it seems since that day at Wortham, when Cousin Stephen and I met you and Elsie in the lane ! How much has happened since then !"

"And yet it is n't so long in weeks," said the literal Dick.

"Poor Steenie ! I wonder where he is now ? He did n't seem to like the thoughts of this last voyage."

"Will he give up the sea when he comes home again?" asked Dick, thinking this was a good opportunity to learn something about this hateful sailor.

"He said he thought he should."

"Why, what will he have to live on?"

"Oh, he has some private money of his own."

"I don't understand his giving up his profession at his age."

"Perhaps he has his own reasons," said Peggy, mischievously. "When his old cousin dies he will come into a nice property, and the cousin is very old."

There was a pause after this. Dick went on picking wild flowers almost savagely; he was making up his mind for the next question.

Peggy took up a stone and threw it along the road. Pixie, barking, bounded after it, snatched it up, and brought it back to her.

"Dear old Pixie!" she said. "I wish I could run as fast as you can."

"Miss Short," Dick said, "don't think me impertinent, but does—that is, do you think your cousin cares for my cousin?"—he blurted out his last words.

The color came vividly into Peggy's face, but she laughed saucily.

"My cousin does not tell me his secrets, Mr. Limber, and if he did, I should be mum."

Dick got very red.

"I beg your pardon. I only thought, you know, after

his visit here, he might have said something to you about Elsie."

Peggy started, then she said, quietly :

"Did my cousin Steenie come here to the farm?"

"To be sure he did, just before he went to sea."

"Ah, yes, yes, of course that was the time he saw Elsie." This was Jesuitical of Peggy, but she did not choose Dick to think she was not in Elsie's confidence.

"How did your father like Stephen?"

"Oh, very well, but he did not see much of him ; he was only here for a few hours, and most of that time he was walking with Elsie."

Peggy bit her lip, and she was silent for several minutes. She felt sorely wounded by her friend's want of confidence toward her ; Elsie had said nothing about Stephen's having been at Hillside. Then her heart gave a sudden bound—most likely he had come to propose to Elsie, to secure her before he left England. Had she accepted him ? Words of Elsie's, not much noticed at the time, came back to her nimble mind, and gave her the assurance that Elsie's answer to her cousin had been "Yes." They were engaged, no doubt. How sly of them both ! how unfriendly of Elsie ! What could be the reason ? But there was joy in the thought that if this was the case, and Stephen and Elsie were engaged, there could not be certainly on her friend's side any attachment to Dick, and sometimes she had fancied this might exist.

Meanwhile her *silence* disturbed her companion.

"You're offended with me, Miss Short, for my curiosity," he said, penitently; "you must forgive me, please—you know I can't help saying and doing stupid things."

"No, you must not say that," she said, with a bright smile. "I was not thinking of—of your curiosity. But how serious we are getting—are n't we, Pixie?" she said to the dog, who was walking beside her, looking up in her face inquiringly every now and then.

"I think if Pixie could speak," said Dick, "she would say: 'If you don't walk faster, good people, we shall not get back in time for tea.'"

"And Mrs. Limber won't like that, so let us 'move on,' as the policemen say in London."

Their path now lay over the downs, gradually ascending, and the view became more striking as they advanced. Presently they arrived at the foot of a rather steep hill, at the top of which was a clump of trees.

"Now don't look back again till I tell you," said Dick, eagerly; "from the top of this is the view I spoke of."

"Very well." Peggy dutifully set her face to the ascent.

"You see, if you keep looking back every minute," exclaimed Dick, "you lose the full effect of the view."

"I must obey my cicerone, so the sooner I am on the top the better. Pixie," she cried, "let us have a race," and off the merry girl started at full speed, the dog bounding before with joyful barks.

"By Jove! she runs like a lapwing," said Dick, look-

ing after her with admiration. "I suppose I must follow."

But he found it no easy matter to overtake the light-footed Peggy, and, in fact, they arrived at the top together.

"Well-done!" cried Dick. "Why, you're a regular Atalanta, Miss Short."

"I—am glad—to find—I'm not—out of practice, though I'm a—a little—out of breath," gasped the laughing girl.

"Now may I turn round, Mr. Limber?"

"Of course you may—thank you for being so awfully obedient."

"Oh, the view is magnificent!" cried Peggy, clapping her hands.

It was not really very remarkable, but to dwellers on the flat range of downs it seemed something very special.

"You must not look any longer," Dick said, and he led the way down the hill.

Mrs. Limber returned from her shopping in Blackwater some time before the hour for tea, but she had met with Miss Roberts and a friend, and she was in a ruffled state of mind. There was no one either in the parlor or the house-place. Elsie was still in her room. Mr. Limber had not come in from his afternoon rounds, and Peggy and Dick had only just reached Buckhurst Hill.

"I suppose they have all gone out for a walk," Mrs. Limber *thought*; and she went up to her room to take off *her wraps*.

Presently she heard her husband's loud, cheery voice in the house-place, and then :

"Harrie, Harrie, are you upstairs?"

She did not answer, but went on with what she was about. In a few minutes she heard his heavy foot in the gallery, and then he came into the room.

"Oh, here you are, my pet. I thought you had n't come back, though Bab said she thought you had"; and he went up to kiss her; she gave him a little push.

"What a noise you do make, Richard. I wish you would give up that vulgar habit of bawling up the stairs."

"Too old to improve, I'm afraid, my pet," he answered, good-humoredly. "Have you been back long?"

"Of course, ever so long."

"Where are the young ones?"

"Out, I suppose. I tell you what, Richard, you'll be sorry by-and-by for the habits you are letting Dick fall into. He's leading an utterly idle life, dangling after girls from morning till night."

"Whew! what's in the wind now, ma'am?"

"He flirts all day long with Peggy Short, and she's as bad as he is. If I'd known she was such a flirt, I would n't have asked her here. If I were Elsie, I would n't stand it. Dick's a stupid fellow, too, to do so."

"Come, Harrie, be fair. You've something to answer for in the matter."

"What do you mean, Mr. Limber?"

"Why, my pet, see here. You got the boy to practise making love to his cousin," said the farmer, laughing, "and now he 's got his hand in, as you may say, you 're hard on him for practising what you preached ; and Miss Peggy 's a girl to turn a lad's head a bit. Like father, like son," the farmer went on, complacently, as he washed his hands. "I was just the same at his age. My belief is, boys and girls take to flirting as easy as sheep take to ba—aing."

"Richard, what nonsense ! You do say the most extraordinary things," said Mrs. Limber, but she could not help smiling at her husband's bucolic simile, while his unwonted eloquence astonished her. "But"—with a sudden change of manner—"of course you think everybody in the house is more right than I am."

"My pet, my pet,"—shaking his head at her like a playful elephant,—"where do you think you 'll go to ? It would take a year of Sundays to find another like you."

Mrs. Limber had made the tea, and Peggy and Dick had not returned. She had found out that Elsie was not with them, which irritated her still more. Presently Elsie appeared.

"Dear me !" said Mrs. Limber, with an air of surprise, "are you in ? You did not go with Dick and Peggy ?"

"No, I had a headache, and I had a letter to write."

"I wonder, Elsie, you, as Peggy's friend, did not interfere," Mrs. Limber said, severely. "I am surprised she should go out alone for a long walk with Dick. I must

give her a caution. What a pity it is parsons' daughters are so often bold ! ”

Mr. Limber never liked to hear his wife “backbite,” as he called it ; he was such a large-hearted man, and so tender of other people's feelings, that censoriousness pained him, and it made him uneasy when his wife was guilty of it.

“Harrie, my dear,” he said, “’t is n’t hanging-day till Monday. Let us have a cup o’ tea ; no doubt Miss Peggy and Dick will be in directly.”

Just then voices were heard in the hall.

“Yes, there they are !” exclaimed Elsie ; and she jumped up and ran out of the room.

“Now, Harrie, don’t be hard on ’em ; he’s a boy yet, and she’s only a girl,” said the farmer. He was getting a little tired of his wife’s cross fit.

“You know nothing about these things, Richard, so please do not interfere. You must remember I have this young girl put under my charge, and I must do my duty by her—as if I were her mother.”

“Yes, yes, my pet,” said Mr. Limber, soothingly, “to be sure, to be sure—and a jolly, pretty young mother you’d make, as any girl or boy might be proud of, hey !”

The thought did cross the good man’s mind : “She ain’t always so straight-laced.”

The door opened, and in came Elsie and Peggy. The delinquent had only stayed outside to get rid of her hat *and wild flowers*.

"I'm very sorry," she said. "I'm afraid I'm rather late ; but we've had a delightful walk to Buckhurst Hill ; and, do you know, Mr. Limber, I'm sure we walked home at the rate of five or six miles an hour " ; and indeed her glowing cheeks and bright, laughing eyes vouched for the truth of what she said.

"My word, Miss Peggy," said the farmer, "you must have borrowed the seven-league boots !"

"It would have been better if you had not walked so far," said Mrs. Limber, coldly. "I hope, Peggy, you did not meet any of the neighbors ?"

"Why ?" said Peggy, opening her eyes.

"I should have thought it was hardly necessary for me to speak more plainly," said Mrs. Limber, with a slight sneer.

Peggy bit her lip. She longed to make a saucy answer.

"I really don't know what persons we met, Mrs. Limber ; our conversation was too interesting for me to notice any one." She said to herself : "Make what you can out of that."

Just then Dick and the collie came into the room.

For the time Peggy had forgotten what had passed between her and Dick about Stephen Brent's visit to the farm, but during the evening it came back to her mind, and almost unconsciously affected her manner to Elsie. "I shall not say any thing to her about it," she thought. "If she likes to have secrets from me, she must ; and, after all, *she may have a good reason.* Steenie may have

asked her not to mention his visit. I'll try not to think any more about it."

But still she did think about it, and it seemed to bring a cloud over the usual sunny character of her talk with Elsie. She did not offer to go with Elsie into her room when they went to bed.

"I am tired," she said, as she gave her friend rather a cold little kiss. "I shall get to bed quickly."

"You seem dull and out of spirits, dear," Elsie answered. "I expect Mrs. Limber has worried you a good deal this evening; she is decidedly in a bad humor."

"Yes," said Peggy. "Oh, dear! life's a puzzle. It is said: 'Put not your trust in princes, or in any child of man'; and it's the best bit of advice that was ever given. Good-night."

Elsie laughed.

"Why, Peggy, you are turning cynic!"

"What is the matter with the dear little thing?" she thought, as she got ready for bed. "I never saw her like that before."

At the end of a fortnight Peggy Short went home. Much of the first delightful charm of her visit to Hillside had gone before she left. The feeling that Elsie had not given her the confidence that she thought one friend ought to give to another, stuck to her like a burr. She was decidedly uncomfortable with Mrs. Limber, who took every occasion to snub her, and to show that she did not approve of her "friendship" (this is what Peggy called it

to herself) for Dick Limber; and added to, and above, all these things, she did not like to leave her mother alone any longer.

Still, when the time came to leave, Peggy was sorry to go. She did not analyze her feelings for the young farmer. She knew she liked him very much, and she believed that he had a great regard for her; she was content to leave the matter for the present in this rather hazy state.

Mr. Limber shook her hand warmly and said he hoped to see her again very soon, but his wife did not echo this hope.

Dick said: "I'm awfully sorry you are going; the place will be quite dull without you."

He sighed as he said it; he was beginning to think he liked her much better than he liked his cousin.

Elsie was unable to understand or to account for Peggy's change of manner toward her; it pained her, but she was very sorry to lose her bright little friend. In thinking over the restraint and coolness that had come over Peggy, the idea did suggest itself to Elsie that it might be connected with Stephen Brent, and she had been several times tempted to take the girl into her confidence, but she felt that this would be unfair to her uncle and to Stephen.

"I don't like the concealment," she said; "the dear little thing is so open with me that it seems like doing her a wrong to keep our engagement from her. I shall be truly glad when I am able to tell Uncle Edward."

After Peggy's departure, time went very slowly with Elsie ; she began to weary of living at Hillside, and to long for her uncle's return to England ; then she could go back to Wortham, and she and Peggy would soon be all right again. She had heard often from her uncle and from her lover.

Stephen's letters were very dear to her, but she thought them far too short, and she told him so. He said she must not measure the strength of his love by the length of his letters. He had often told her that he was a wretched letter-writer, and now she would find out how truly he had spoken. But the letters were made very dear and interesting to Elsie by fond expressions of endearment, turning that which was but an ordinary dish of words into (for her) "a dainty dish to set before a king."

"Dear Stephen," she thought, "how modest he is ! and he really writes a capital letter. After all, I don't care to know so much about what he sees as to know what he feels."

BOOK FOURTH.

CHAPTER I.

FROM AMERICA.

IT was now nearly six months since Mr. Martin had gone to the United States. In his last letter to Elsie he had spoken of the time being near when he should set out on his homeward journey. She was, indeed, daily expecting a letter from him to say when he would probably arrive in England, and she was very happy at the prospect. Only yesterday she had written to Peggy Short, and had finished her letter by saying :

“ Perhaps, dear, I shall not write to you any more before I leave this ; Uncle Edward will soon be home now. I am almost too happy at the idea of seeing him again, and of being once more in my own dear home.”

This afternoon she was sitting in her room after dinner, writing to her lover. Her practice was to write him a little each day until a good long letter was finished. The table she was writing at was near the open window, and every now and then she looked up and gazed out over the landscape.

Elsie's thoughts to-day were very full of both her loved ones, who were separated from her by the immensity of that calm but deceitful sea. It was a very constant regret to her that her uncle Edward did not know of her engagement to Stephen Brent,—the dash of bitterness in the joy with which she thought of that event in her life ; and, if she could ever blame her lover for any thing, it was for this : that he had made her promise to keep their engagement a secret from this dearly loved uncle.

Downstairs Mr. Limber was as usual enjoying his after-dinner smoke near his wife. Between the puffs, he was describing to her some improvements in drainage he had been superintending that morning ; but she was paying no attention to his story. When he entered into this sort of detail, he got little more than "Yes" or "No" from his wife, unless she thought he was committing any extravagance ; and sometimes these monosyllabic answers were given in the wrong place. But the good-natured man seldom rebuked her any more than by saying: "Mrs. Limber, you 're in the clouds," or, "My dear, I don't think you heard what I was saying."

To-day she had just answered "Yes" when she ought to have said "No." Mr. Limber laughed, took the pipe from his mouth, and with his left thumb in an arm hole of his waistcoat, he began to call her attention to her blunder, enforcing his words with the stem of his pipe, when a loud double knock at the porch door startled them both.

"Hullo! who can that be?" said the farmer.

Mrs. Limber jumped up. She flushed violently and then turned pale. Since that unexpected visit of Stephen Brent's some months ago, an unusual knock at the outer door startled her.

"I dare say it's Mrs. Collingwood—or perhaps it's the rector," she said.

The maid opened the parlor door.

"Here's a gentleman come as wants to see master on business; here's his card."

Mrs. Limber gave a sort of gasp; she almost snatched the card from the maid's hand, and eagerly looked at it. A sigh of relief followed.

"Who is it, my dear?" asked the farmer.

"Mr. Gordon—from Wortham."

"Gordon—Gordon! Why, that's Edward Martin's young partner; what can he want? Show him into my room, Bab; say I'll be there in a minute."

Mr. Limber carefully knocked the ashes out of his pipe, then he got up and shook himself.

"Perhaps he wants to see Elsie," he said, as he left the room.

"You can bring him in here, Richard," Mrs. Limber called after her husband. Her curiosity was roused.

The minutes passed slowly with her till the door opened and her husband appeared with Mr. Gordon.

Both men looked very serious.

"This is my wife, Mr. Gordon; she will be truly sorry to hear your news."

Mrs. Limber bowed, and then she looked questioningly from one man to the other.

"What is the matter?" she said.

There was clearly something very much the matter with Mr. Gordon; he seemed quite off his ordinary balance of propriety and self-assertion,—quite thrown out of gear; even his shirt collar was limp.

"I am the bearer of very bad news from America," he said, almost nervously. "Mr. Martin has been in a terrible railway accident."

"Not killed?" Mrs. Limber interrupted, with a look of horror.

"Yes, my dear, yes—too true," her husband said, passing his hand over his eyes. "My God! who is to tell our poor Elsie?"

"How dreadful!" said Mrs. Limber.

"It is indeed a sad affair," said Mr. Gordon. "And knowing how deeply attached Miss Neale was to her uncle, I thought it was better to come myself than to write the sad news."

The door opened and Elsie came in. She started at the sight of Mr. Gordon.

"Has my uncle come back unexpectedly?" she said, as she shook hands with him.

"N-no, he has not," he said, sadly.

"Mr. Gordon, you have something bad to tell me," she said, gazing anxiously in the lawyer's face; "my uncle Edward is ill?"

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Limber, "I am sorry to say he is very ill."

"Does he want me to go to him? I am ready. You are come for me, Mr. Gordon; let us go at once," she said, rapidly.

"My dearest child!" Mr. Limber went slowly up to her and took her hand in his; "bear up, my dear; don't agitate yourself, it's God's will."

Elsie looked hard into his kindly face.

"Is he dead?" she asked, in a low, stricken voice.

"My poor lamb!" he said, kissing her tenderly on the forehead.

She turned from him, covered her face with her hands and broke into bitter sobbing.

Mr. Martin had not been killed at once, but he had been so severely injured that he only lingered for a few days after the accident. Mr. Gordon had received a letter from the firm of lawyers in New York with whom Mr. Martin had been connected in the business which took him to America, giving him an account of the accident, and conveying to him Mr. Martin's last instructions. Through these lawyers, Elsie's uncle had sent her a loving farewell, which he begged Mr. Gordon to give to her, so that the shock might be softened to her in every way possible. He said she would find all his wishes set forth in his will. He desired to be buried beside his father and mother at Wortham. And, in accordance with

his instructions, the lawyers said that when Mr. Gordon received their letter, the body would be on its way to England.

Mr. Gordon accepted Mr. Limber's hospitality for the night, but the next morning he returned to Wortham. He said he could not remain longer away from business, and also that there would be a great deal to settle in connection with Mr. Martin's death. He arranged with Elsie that as soon as was possible she should go to Wortham with her uncle Limber and her cousin Dick for the funeral, and to be present at the reading of the will. The executors, Mr. Gordon said, were two old friends of Mr. Martin's, living at Wortham.

CHAPTER II.

CONDOLENCES.

THE shock of her uncle's death, gently as it had been told her, was very terrible to Elsie ; it had been so unexpected. For several days she felt stunned, and quite unable to realize her loss, or to believe that she should never see her uncle's well-loved face again in this world. Her heart felt like a stone ; for, since the first burst of grief, she had not been able to shed any tears.

The news affected Mrs. Limber deeply also, but after a different manner. It set her scheming brain to work as to how this new turn in the wheel was to be applied.

Elsie was now her own mistress ; she would soon be of age, and come into possession of her fortune. She was no longer a prospective heiress, but a rich girl. Death had removed, too, all obstacles between her and Stephen Brent. While Mr. Martin lived, there was the hope that he might object to Stephen, but he was dead, and there was nothing to prevent Elsie from marrying the young sailor as soon as he returned to England. Something must be done, before he came back, to make this impossible. In the meantime, Mrs. Limber told herself, she must do every thing in her power to bring Elsie under her influence, and make the girl fond of her.

When Mr. and Mrs. Limber were in their room on the night Mr. Gordon had brought the news, they had some talk on the subject uppermost in their thoughts.

"It is terribly bad for our dear Elsie," said the tender-hearted farmer. "She is awfully cut up, poor thing. I 'd have given a deal to have spared it her."

"Yes, it is sad, and I 'm very sorry for *her*, though, of course, I don't pretend to care much about the old man. But our sorrow for Elsie must n't make us shut our eyes to the change that it has made in her position."

"I don't see, my pet, that it will make any difference to us."

"You don't ! Then I must show you, you dear, dull old thing. It must bring matters to a climax between her and Dick. When it is known for certain that she inherits old Martin's money, there will be plenty after

her. I believe that Mr. Gordon has his own ideas on the subject. We must work doubly hard for Dick now."

"You 're a wonderful step-mother, my pet," said Mr. Limber, looking at his wife with fond admiration.

She was sitting before the looking-glass, combing out her long, black hair as she talked.

"But, Harrie dear, I don't like plotting and planning, and specially, as you may say in a figure, when the poor old man is hardly cold—and besides, what are you going to do with the sailor lad? No, no, there is nothing I should like better than to have Elsie for a daughter, but Dick has lost his chance, the girl's booked for the sailor."

"But why won't you take my judgment, dear? You do think me clever, don't you, Richard?"

"That I do, my pet—you know I do."

"Very well, then, listen, you dear old thing!" It is impossible to say what Mr. Limber would not have done to be called a "dear old thing" by his wife; he would have listened on his knees, if she had asked him to do so. "When Elsie has got over her excessive grief, and she feels softened by sorrow, she 'll be quite ready to listen to Dick; and he 'll have a better chance with her than ever; it's the way with girls, dear."

"Ah—h'm—yes, there 's something in that. But, my pet, I make one bargain. The dear girl must be left quiet just at present; let time and sorrow work—why I was——" he stopped, it occurred to him that he had better not complete his sentence.

"Of course, of course."

Mrs. Limber was deep in her own thoughts.

"My dear Elsie," Mrs. Limber said, sitting down beside the girl after Mr. Gordon had started next morning, "you cannot think how my heart bleeds for you." She took Elsie's passive hand and kissed her. "It is indeed the most terrible misfortune I ever heard of—so sudden, too ; just as we were all rejoicing in the thought that the dear old man would be soon among us again. I cannot understand why such things are allowed to be—to wring our hearts. But, dear, it is a comfort for you, in the midst of it all, to think that your dear uncle was able to send you some farewell words. To me it would be a comfort inexpressible."

"Yes, it is a great comfort. But"—she gave a deep sigh—"if I had only said good-bye to him when he went away !"

"My dear Elsie, you can't blame yourself for that. But now I want to say to you that I hope you will let me see after your mourning. If you like, I will at once go over to Blackwater, and do your shopping, and arrange with the dressmaker. Naturally, all this would be very painful to you to do ; and believe me, dear, my desire is to spare you any additional pain or anxiety."

"How kind and thoughtful you are !" said Elsie, kissing her, and the tears came into her eyes and eased her heart ; "this will be a great relief to me. I do feel

so ill this morning that I hardly know how to think. In a day or two I hope I shall be more myself. Yes, dear Mrs. Limber, do as you think best about—about my things.”

“Very well, dear, then I will go at once.”

The news that Elsie had lost her uncle quickly spread over the neighborhood, with the usual variations in accuracy that such news acquire, but her friends were unanimous in their sympathy and condolence.

Mrs. Collingwood, the squire’s wife, drove over the next day and spent an hour with Elsie ; for the time her affectations disappeared, and she was so truly sympathetic that the girl was greatly comforted by her friend’s visit.

“I hope, dear, you will come and stay with me at the Hall by and by,” Mrs. Collingwood said, as she took leave of her.

Hardly had the squire’s wife gone, when Mrs. and Miss Roberts called at the farm, full of all the usual kindly platitudes suitable to the sad occasion.

Then soon after came the vicar. He was a good but rather pompous man, a man who seemed to consider that all he said partook of the value of diamonds and pearls, if one might judge by the words which dropped out of his mouth in a *staccato* fashion. Elsie did not derive any of the comfort he intended her to receive from his visit.

Coming away from Hillside, the vicar met Mr. Limber *not far from the house.*

"Good-day, Mr. Limber," he said, in his finest manner, stopping to shake hands with the farmer. "I have called to see your niece ; poor thing, I thought it might be a comfort to her. Her loss is sudden and sad—sudden and sad," he repeated, as if pleased with the alliteration. "But as I told her, Providence has its own way of dealing with us. Ah, yes—yes—I had not the pleasure of knowing her uncle, but from all I gather he was a worthy man—a most worthy man."

"Yes, Mr. Roberts, you're right—he was a very good man," said the farmer, his simple distinctness of speech contrasting favorably with the vicar's pompous periods.

"Mrs. Limber tells me that you and your niece are going in a few days to Wortham, to be present at the last sad rites ; the body will then have arrived from America."

"That's so," said the farmer. "We go for the funeral and to hear the will read. Elsie is her uncle's heiress," Mr. Limber added, proudly, "and I warrant there's a good bit o' money left her."

"Mr. Martin was a rich man, then ? H'm, h'm ! worthy and wealthy—worthy and wealthy—two fine things in a man, Mr. Limber. I suppose now, Mr. Limber, that your son will have been remembered by his uncle ?"

"Yes, for sure. But old Martin was open about it : my boy only gets a legacy ; Elsie takes the bulk. 'T was a bit of a disappointment to me when I heard on 't first ; but no doubt 't is all for the best."

"No doubt, no doubt; these things are always ordered for the best—it is our duty to think so, Mr. Limber," puffed out the parson. "Your niece is a charming girl—most charming. I'm sorry I have not a son—ha, ha! ha, ha!" he laughed, graciously.

"My Dick's very fond of his cousin," said Mr. Limber.

"And what may the young woman say to this? It takes two for a marriage, my good friend—two," said the vicar, sententiously. "And remember, it is not wise for cousins to marry. Good-day, Mr. Limber."

The vicar in his heart would not have objected to have Dick Limber for his own son-in-law.

Dick felt deeply for his cousin in her sorrow, and he expressed his feelings simply and earnestly.

"I'm awfully cut up about it, Elsie," he said, "both for you and for myself. You know I got quite fond of uncle that time at Wortham. I don't know any man I liked so well."

"Thank you, Dick," she said, with her sweet smile, giving him her hand. "I believe you; for indeed who could help loving Uncle Edward, when they knew him!"

"I'd have done any thing in my power that it had n't happened," the young fellow said, pressing her hand in his strong grip. "I would indeed."

And altogether her cousin was so kind and thoughtful for her, and said so many sympathizing words about his

uncle, that she was able to talk to Dick of her loss more freely than to any one else, and this broke down the reserve that had been growing up between them, and brought them into closer friendship than they had ever before been.

Even Mr. Limber noticed the change in Elsie's manner to his son, and when his wife remarked on it, he said :

"You 'll be right, after all, Harrie ; you always are—and I don't mind saying the money will come in useful for many improvements I want to make ; but, for all that, we 'll leave them to settle it themselves."

At which his wife shrugged her shoulders, and called him in her heart a slow old fool.

Sam Brown was not behind the rest in kindly words when he saw Miss Neale.

"I beg your pardon, miss—I 've heered ov your misfortin, and I 'm right sorry. What a pity 't is, Miss, all the gude ones die fust ; there baint such a large crop on 'em neither."

CHAPTER III.

MR. MARTIN'S WILL.

SO well did Mrs. Limber manage in regard to the mourning, that in three days after she had talked over the matter with Elsie the young girl was provided

with all things necessary. And on the morning of the fifth day after they knew of Mr. Martin's death, Mr. Limber, Elsie, and Dick started for Wortham.

The party arrived at the pleasant little town of red-brick houses in the afternoon. The sight of the old familiar house, with all the blinds drawn down, and then the appearance of Mrs. Castles in deep mourning, realized to Elsie, more than any thing else had done, her bitter loss. The usually grand-mannered, somewhat hard-eyed old housekeeper showed how heavily the sad news had shaken her. While she gave them a solemn welcome, her eyes were softened by the tears she had evidently shed, and she spoke in a subdued voice. Her manner to Elsie was almost that of a tender mother. She even forgot to be lofty to Dick and his father.

She led the way to the drawing-room, and stirred the blazing fire.

"I thought you would like a cup of tea to warm you when you arrived, my dear," Elsie never remembered such a tender epithet to have been addressed to her before by Mrs. Castles. "And you do look sad and tired to death. Him that 's dead and gone"—with a heavy sigh—"used to say, 'Castles, there 's nothing refreshes me after a journey like a cup of tea,' and I thought of this when I was getting it ready."

"That 's so, Mrs. Castles," said the farmer, "tea is a blessed invention. Our ancestors have something to be proud of in it."

Elsie soon went to her room, and Mrs. Castles went with her. After Mr. Limber had seen Mr. Gordon, he and Dick had walked out into the town. The farmer said he should like to look over the old place, and see what changes had been made in it since his last visit.

Mrs. Castles went with Elsie to her room, ostensibly to help her unpack her box, but really to have the opportunity of getting a little talk about her beloved master. Elsie was glad to hear some details of the last days her uncle had passed in his house before he went to America.

"Oh! Miss Neale," Mrs. Castles broke out with, "how little did poor dear master think he was to perish in a foreign land when he left that morning! 'Castles,' his last words were to me as he stood on the doorstep with his cab full of luggage--'Castles,' he says, 'if I never come back from America, I 've not forgotten you.' Was n't it sweet of him, Miss, and was n't it like a presentiment, Miss? 'You 're provided for, Castles,' he says."

"Did he seem in good spirits when he went away?"

"He was as gay as a boy, Miss Neale. My! how he did rush about them last few days—here, there, and everywhere! He did a year's work in 'em; and he put every thing in my solemn charge; he said, 'You 'll consider Mr. Gordon the same as me, Castles.' But he ain't. Not that I 've a word to breathe against him; he 's quite a pleasant gentleman to live with, very much so,

most nice and gentlemanly ; but Lor', to talk of him in the same breath with my dear master would be contrary to facts ! Oh, dear, oh, dear ! 't would be hard to find *his* match—such a pattern of gentility, and so kind and good as master was, there 's no one good enough to stand in his shoes."

The good woman sobbed, and wiped her eyes with her apron.

Elsie could hardly help smiling at Mrs. Castles' mixed talk. She said :

" I cannot bear to think that dear uncle will never be here again."

" And there 's a many, Miss Neale, as says the same. There 's been quite a lot of poor folk coming to the house since the news of poor master got about—folk as even I knew nothing of, who master had been kind to—pensioners-like ; and some of the poor creatures began to cry when I told 'em it was all true, and they said their best friend was gone. I did my best to comfort 'em, poor souls ; but Lor', words are poor comfort instead of deeds !"

Elsie was crying now.

" Dear Uncle Edward," she said, " how good he was ! But, Mrs. Castles, these poor people shall be my charge now ; I will do every thing just as I think he would wish it done."

" *Miss Short* came flying down this morning, Miss, to *know what time* you was expected. Mr. Gordon had let

'em know she said, on the spur of the moment; and they was dreadful cut up. Miss Peggy she will be here presently, I'm sure. There's a knock at the street-door, Miss; that's hers, no doubt."

"If it is, ask her to come up here."

In a minute or two Mrs. Castles showed Peggy into the room, and left the two friends together. After a warm embrace, they sat down side by side on a sofa. In the face of this bereavement, Peggy forgot the wound her friendship had received.

"Oh! my darling," she said, fondling Elsie's hand, and every now and then giving her a kiss. "It is terrible for you. I cannot tell you how grieved I am. Mamma sends you her fond love; she is sure you know how much she sympathizes with you. Poor mamma, she is dreadfully upset by the sad news. Mr. Gordon sent us a line directly he knew. Mamma says she feels just as if she had lost a relation herself."

"Yes, dear," said Elsie, dreamily, "I know she and dear uncle were great friends—" here she broke down. "Oh, Peggy, Peggy, I shall never have such a friend again!"

Peggy tried to comfort her, and it soothed Elsie to sit beside her, her head resting on her shoulder, while Peggy every now and then laid her soft blooming cheek against her friend's and repeated to her some of the kind words she had heard people say of her uncle.

Peggy did not leave Elsie till she looked less sad, and

when she went she promised to come back early next morning.

"Mamma will come too, dear," she said.

Dinner-time was a severe trial to Elsie. It was so sad to sit down in the dear familiar room with faces round her that did not belong to its memories, and to see Mr. Gordon in her uncle's place as host.

Dinner-time had always been her privileged time with her uncle, for in the evening he had sometimes gone back to his office and left her alone, but at dinner-time when the servants went away they had had those delightful talks, that kind of open-hearted communion which is not frequent between the old and the young.

Mr. Gordon watched Elsie attentively ; he thought she looked lovelier than ever in her black dress, and it was strange to see how her sweetness and gentleness reacted on him. She had no thought of charming him, she was bent on controlling the sorrow which every trifling object, taking her directly back to the past, evoked ; and yet unconsciously she worked a charm on the young lawyer. The angles of his manner softened. He forgot all about self and self-display in his efforts to please and soothe this sweet, sad girl. Mr. Limber thought he was unusually civil, but Dick was quick enough to make out the truth ; he saw that Gordon was trying to impress Elsie favorably, and he felt sulky.

Elsie had regained in these last days much of her old

influence over Dick Limber, and although he cherished a flattered remembrance of the fascinations of Peggy Short, he was resolved that no "prig of a lawyer" should have Elsie. His cousin was surprised and grateful when he came to her relief, and struck into the conversation she found so difficult to keep up with Mr. Gordon.

Mrs. Castles had decided that the proper thing would be for Miss Elsie to marry Mr. Gordon, then every thing could go on in the way it had done in Mr. Martin's time. Miss Elsie would be sure to stick to old ways.

She thought there could only be one objection to such a marriage : Miss Elsie was good enough to be sought for herself, and Mrs. Castles believed that Mr. Gordon was, as she said, "swithering" between Miss Neale and Miss Short. She knew that of late he had frequently called at the widow's cottage.

"A thing which don't ought to be," the housekeeper said ; "considering that Miss Short has come down in the world and only keeps one servant, she ain't appropriate."

However, next morning she was very glad to usher Miss Short and her mother up to Elsie's room.

To her friend's surprise Elsie announced her intention of being present at the funeral. Perhaps if she had known the general sympathy that was shown by the good people of Wortham when it was known that the remains of their valued fellow townsman had reached the station on their way to the place of burial, and the excitement the news had created, she would have hesitated. She

shrank when she saw the crowd in front of the house, but she went on bravely. It was a dull day with leaden clouds and a bitter north wind, but it was in harmony with the sad scene.

Beside the grave Elsie grew so white that both her uncle and Dick were alarmed for her, but she did not faint, and when she reached home again she told Mrs. Short she was glad, in spite of all, that she had been able to pay this last token of affection to her uncle.

In the afternoon Elsie went down to the dear old library to hear the will read. She found her uncle and Dick, Mrs. Castles, the old coachman, the gardener, the two executors, Mr. Gordon, and her uncle's chief clerk.

In his will, which was read aloud by the clerk, Mr. Martin stated that articles of partnership had been signed between him and Mr. Gordon ; and that in the event of of his death before a dissolution of the said partnership, the business would become the property of Mr. Gordon—a sum of five hundred pounds yearly to be deducted from the profits thereof and placed to the account of Miss Elsie Neale ; then came an annuity of fifty pounds to Mrs. Castles ; legacies to the gardener, the coachman, and the executors ; a legacy of £1,000 to Richard Limber, junior ; and the whole of the rest of the property to his beloved niece, Elsie Neale. In the event of her dying childless, half of it was to pass to Richard Limber, and the other half to be divided among the hospitals at *Worham* ; if Elsie left children, the property was to

be shared among them at her death. She would not come into possession of her money till her twenty-first birthday, and till then Mr. Martin wished her to reside at Hillside, under the guardianship of her uncle, Mr. Limber.

Elsie left the room as soon as the reading of the will was over, and Mr. Limber crossed over to Mr. Gordon, who stood chatting with the two executors.

"Now, how much do you reckon she's left worth?" said the farmer, "for I suppose you can make sense out of all that jargon."

Gordon looked at him keenly, but one of the executors, Mr. Drake, who was a former acquaintance of the farmer's, answered at once :

"I fancy—well, there 'll be something over forty thousand pounds when all 's settled. You 'll have plenty of suitors for your rich ward, Mr. Limber, eh?"

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LIMBER CALLS ON MRS. SHORT.

ELSIE could not tell whether she were glad or sorry at the prospect of going back to live at Hillside. She wished to be near Peggy, but just now the memories that thronged Wortham were painful to her; all that reminded her of her uncle rebuked her with a *stinging pain*; it seemed so ungrateful to have

kept the only great secret of her life from the dear friend who had given her so much love and kindness.

Mr. Limber was anxious to go home and tell the news to his wife, and Dick was becoming hourly more impatient of Mr. Gordon's devotion to his cousin. He thought it was unseemly at such a time for a man to do any thing in the way of love-making, and he was certain that he saw love in Gordon's eyes when he looked at Elsie.

"It 's certain Uncle Edward did n't mean it," he said to his father, "or he 'd have settled for Elsie to live at Wortham."

They were smoking in the garden after dinner on the day of the funeral, and as his son spoke, Mr. Limber peered through the cloud he had been making and looked curiously at him.

"What 's he after now, I wonder," he thought. "Is he going to take up with Elsie because of the money?—it ain't a bit like Dick, though, to do so."

The farmer wished Elsie could always be at Hillside, but still he was very fond of Peggy Short. She was so bright and saucy, and she laughed so merrily at all his jokes, and it seemed to him that Dick was fond of the girl.

"I say, Dick, should n't we call on Miss Short," he said, "before we go away? I have named to Elsie I want to get home as soon as may be. She told me she should not go and see any one."

"Yes, we can go"; but Dick did not show the alacrity his father expected.

To do him justice, he was so much touched by his cousin's sorrow that he did not feel in a mood to laugh and joke with bright little Peggy; and there was also a curious reluctance in his mind to seeing her, which he could not explain to himself, not being in the habit of examining his own feelings.

It was a disappointment and at the same time a relief to hear that only Mrs. Short was at home.

The widow received both father and son very graciously. Her feelings toward Mrs. Limber disposed her to look upon the farmer as a victim, and she was grateful to him for his kindness to Peggy.

"I'm sure we were much obliged to you for letting her come," Mr. Limber said, "were n't we, Dick? and we'll all be rarely pleased to see her again."

Dick did not repeat his affirmative movement; he was wondering what his step-mother would think of this invitation.

"You are very kind"—Mrs. Short gave the farmer a look of gratitude that went to his heart. "I cannot give Peggy the change she needs, and I am so thankful to let her go where she is as happy as she was with you; she looked so bonny when she came back it was a treat to see her, and she said you were all so kind."

She looked at Dick, and he moved uneasily.

"Will she be in soon, do you think?" he said.

At this she went off into a musing fit, darning stockings meantime very carefully. She had a happy past to look back on, and though now and then a hot tear fell over the fine darns her deft fingers were making, still there was no anguish in her face, and when she heard the trip, trip of brisk feet on the garden path, she could smile blithely, and give poor, tired Peggy a hearty welcome.

"Sit down and warm yourself, dear," she said, "you must be so cold."

"Poor little mother," the girl murmured between her loving kisses, "has it been very dull, alone all day?"

Mrs. Short looked significant.

"I have not been all alone," she said; "but tell me your news, dear. Were the children good or greedy?"

"I am afraid there was nothing to boast of," said Peggy, laughing; "for every good child there was a greedy one and a half. I can't imagine how they could laugh as they did after eating such lumps of cake, but they managed to laugh heartily at the conjuror's jokes; but now, little mother, tell me who were your visitors."

"Can you not guess?" Peggy's eyes fell under her mother's questioning gaze. "Well, then," Mrs. Short went on, "I've had the two Mr. Limbers—the farmer, you know, and his son; I had forgotten that he was to have come, Peggy."

Peggy blushed.

"Did they ask after me?" she said.

"Oh, yes; and Mr. Limber gave a most cordial invita-

tion for you. You would like to pay another visit to Hillside, would you not?" She fixed her eyes on her daughter's face.

Peggy did not look as much pleased as her mother expected.

"I am not quite sure," she said, slowly.

"I wonder why"—her mother spoke in the same tone,—"you are so fond of Elsie and of your friend Harriet, and nothing could be more cordial than Mr. Limber's invitation. I like him, Peggy; he is rather rough and unpolished, but I am sure he is a good, kind man, and when you have lived as long in the world as I have, child, you will learn the true value of surface qualities."

"Very likely."

Mrs. Short's curiosity got the better of her motherly discretion; she had not been satisfied with Peggy's manner when she came back to Hillside, but she was wise in such cases, and resolved to wait till matters had explained themselves. It had seemed to her possible that there might be the beginning of an attachment between her daughter and young Dick Limber, and she knew that it was always wiser to leave such things to take care of themselves. But now her daughter's hesitating manner and troubled face made her forget her caution.

"Surely, Peggy, you would like to go to Hillside again?"

"I should like it very much, mother, but—" Peggy's bright face flushed all over.

"But what? I suppose, after all, there is some one you don't like at Hillside? I should not like Mrs. Limber, but then she is your friend."

Peggy raised her head and looked straight into her mother's eyes.

"I know, mother, I seem ungracious when it is so kind of you to want to give me pleasure; but, mother dear, Harriet Gray and Mrs. Limber are quite different,—that old friendship is dead and buried; but I loved her once, so I'd rather not speak against her." She turned away her head, and her mother saw tears in her eyes.

"I am not surprised," she said; "some natures improve with prosperity, but I did not think Harriet Gray's would; she always seemed to take all kindness shown her as a right—so different from that sweet girl, Elsie—but still, Peggy, if Mr. Limber and Elsie both wish for you, I should think you should go to Hillside in the course of the summer."

"We shall see," Peggy said; in her heart she was thinking:

"If mother had said young Mr. Limber was so anxious I should go back to the farm, it would be quite different."

♦

CHAPTER V.

ELSIE TAKES AN INTEREST IN "STOCK."

EVEN with people whose imagination has been dwarfed by worldly aims and cares it is curious to see a certain want of power of realization.

They contrive and plan and even force themselves to believe they desire that which it is their interest to desire ; but when that which they have sought is placed within their grasp, they not unfrequently recoil, because all the while they have hidden away, on some dark shelf of the brain, a darker purpose which the attainment of this object will make a necessity.

Elsie and her uncle and cousin returned to Hillside and were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Limber. But the farmer was impatient to get out his news. He scarcely waited the end of his wife's greeting to Elsie, as she helped her to take off some of her wraps before a huge fire that was burning on the old hearth.

"Ah," he said, "you 'll have to treat her like an heiress, ma'am, mind that ; she 's worth bidding for, I can tell you ; she 's worth her forty thousand pounds. What d' ye say to that, Harrie ?"

"Oh, hush, Richard !" his wife's face expressed supreme disgust ; "how can you say such things. As if any thing can make me value our dear Elsie more than I do already." She turned to the girl, but Elsie had already *begun to go up stairs.*

Mrs. Limber waited till she heard a door close in the bedroom gallery, and then she went up close to her husband.

"Where 's Dick?" she said, gravely.

"He 's there talking to Sam most likely, he 'll be here directly—but ar' n't you surprised, my dear?"

"Well, no. Those quiet men are usually much richer than people fancy. Has he done any thing for you or for Dick?"

"He 's left Dick only a thousand, and I can see the boy is annoyed at it; if he outlives Elsie, and she should die leaving no child, then Dick comes in for half."

"And who gets the other half?" Mrs. Limber's eyes glittered.

"The other—oh, some hospitals; but I should say Elsie's life is as good as Dick's, perhaps better; if she has a child, the money stays with her—so you see——"

"I see," she said, very slowly; "and I see, more than ever, how wise my first idea was—about Dick and his cousin."

Mr. Limber stroked her cheek with his broad, red hand.

"Yes—yes, you are always wise, my pet; and if Dick had been alive, instead of flinging away his chances it might have been all right for him. Now, I'm afraid the sailor and Miss Peggy have put two spokes in that wheel."

Mrs. Limber smiled.

"What a dear obstinate old thing you are!" she said.

"Have I not told you we shall hear no more of the sailor?"

He was only flirting just as Dick has flirted with Peggy Short ; and really Dick was not to blame, for Peggy is very forward."

"Now, my pet, don't you run down Peggy, that's a good girl. I have n't told you yet : we called there and made acquaintance with the mother ; you can't think what a nice woman she is."

"Is she ?"—Mrs. Limber spoke carelessly. "I saw her once years ago and did not care for her—she may be nice now, but, Richard, I'm sure you would not have approved of the way she snubbed her husband ; and she was quite another sort of parson's wife from Mrs. Roberts."

"Dear heart," said the puzzled farmer, "I should never have thought it ; why, she's almost as bright and pleasant-spoken as Miss Peggy."

"You poor dear," his wife said, pityingly, "of course she's like Peggy, and Peggy will be just such another tyrant to her husband as her mother was."

Mr. Limber opened his mouth and said : "Lord bless me ! d' ye mean it ?" and as he went up stairs he told himself his wife was the wisest as well as the prettiest little woman that could be found anywhere. "My word, how she does see through folk !"

She stood still where he had left her, but presently she began to tap her foot impatiently on the hearth-stone, covered at this time of year with a flaring rug on which a lion and tiger were represented growling at one another.

"I begin to hate her," she said; "if she marries Dick she will always be the heiress, and nothing here will be good enough for her,"—she paused. "Well, I knew all this before, did I not—then why did I wish the marriage?"

Her face grew dark and hard in expression, and the thought, half seen and thrust out of sight, revealed itself boldly. Elsie might die, and then all her money would be Dick's for ever.

Mrs. Limber's face cleared, and the wish she had once so longed to see accomplished, came back. Yes, Dick must marry Elsie—and the future would take care of itself.

The little journey together, and perhaps the sympathy he had felt in her sorrow, had drawn Elsie and her uncle into closer intimacy, and Mrs. Limber's dislike gathered strength during the evening as she watched the affectionate looks her husband bestowed on his niece.

Elsie was very sad and quiet. Till now her uncongenial surroundings had been cheered by the hope of soon going back to the pleasant home at Wortham and the dear friend who sympathized with all her tastes and pursuits. At Hillside when in-doors she had found no sympathy—even in music Mrs. Limber's taste was artificial; there was no spontaneous element in it, and she only cared to sing when there was some one by to listen.

Mr. Limber was troubled to see the sad, drooping face of his niece.

"Good-night, my dear," he said, and he lighted her

candle himself. "Will you come with me and see the calves to-morrow?—there 's a pair of 'em since we left."

"Yes, thank you, uncle," Elsie said. "I think calves are lovely, and I am fond of all young things."

Dick had not appeared since supper-time, and there was a dead silence when the husband and wife were left alone together.

"Have you seen the calves, my dear?" the farmer said at last.

"No, I 'm not 'fond of all young things,' or I should not have married you." She mimicked Elsie's voice so spitefully that the farmer winced. "I think it shows a coarse taste in women to care for live-stock."

Mr. Limber was conscious that he had somehow given offence, but he was used to this.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, submissively; "you are right about most things, Harrie. I wish I could think you right about Dick and Elsie."

Next morning the weather seemed to have taken up. It was very cold, but the sky was bright and clear and the sun shone over the sea.

As Elsie stood waiting for her uncle while he talked to Sam Brown, it seemed to her that there was plenty of in-door and out-door life in which to occupy herself till Stephen's return.

Presently Mr. Limber came striding into the yard, followed by his factotum. Elsie thought her uncle always looked best in his farming suit; his round gray hat and coat *suit*ed his simple face and manner.

"That's right, Elsie," he said, with a pleased smile; "you're a woman of your word—now come along."

He opened the half door, and she looked into the cow-house. Two pretty little brown-and-white creatures, not yet two days old, were walking about as unconcernedly as if all around were not new to them.

Sam Brown put some milk before them, and they sucked it up greedily with their large fleshy tongues.

"If it were summer, instead of winter," Mr. Limber said, triumphantly, "we'd have 'em out in the near meadow; they've got all their wits already as you see. To my mind a calf is one of the prettiest of God's creatures, if 't were a trifle shorter in the legs. But 't is a bit uncouth in its antics—see there," as Sam Brown stooped to pick up the pail which the biggest calf, grown frisky by feeding, had knocked over in its gambols.

"They are very pretty," said Elsie; "it is hard to believe they are so young. Now, uncle, have you any more young creatures to show me?"

Mr. Limber was delighted. He took her to see his new short-horns, but he was disappointed by her ignorance respecting them; and then as a special treat he showed her his Durham bull of ancient descent and great value.

It grieved him a little when Elsie said that next to the calves she most admired a pair of horned owls which belonged to Sam Brown, and which were housed in a rock grotto at the back of the stables. They were splendid

birds, and it was a fine sight to see their yellow eyes glitter like topazes when they became aware of the presence of intruders.

Elsie heard a suppressed laugh, and she saw Sam's children passing from behind their garden gate with their bonnets and school-bags.

Elsie nodded to the children, who were in her class at Sunday-school. They curtsied and opened the gate.

"You are going to school, are you not?" she said.

The eldest girl curtsied and said, "Yes, Miss," but the two others were much too shy to speak; they buried their chins in their pinafores, and stood like small wooden images on either side of the gate, each with a school-bag hanging on her arm.

Elsie felt a strange longing for employment this morning, and it seemed to her that she might be more useful to these little human creatures than she could possibly be to their playmates, the calves and chickens.

"Do they teach you to sew at school?" she said.

"Yes, please, Miss."

"Do they teach you to knit stockings and darn them?"

There was another curtsy; then in a rapid, gasping voice, which seemed half sigh, half whisper:

"No, Miss, they does n't; mother sews up the holes in our socks, but we reads and writes."

"I will come and teach you how to darn stockings, if you like," said Elsie.

"Thank you, Miss." The small owner of the gasping voice dropped a curtsy. "Please, Miss," she jerked out, "we all does sums."

"Do you? Well, you had better go to school now," said Elsie, "or you will be late. I will go and see your mother."

Mr. Limber had stood by listening; he wondered whether his wife would approve. She had always kept aloof from Mrs. Brown and her untidy cottage.

BOOK FIFTH.

CHAPTER I.

SUSPENSE.

ALTHOUGH Stephen Brent's letters to Elsie were not lengthy epistles, they came pretty regularly when his ship was stationary, and Mrs. Limber, by one way or another, contrived to know when they came. It was now June, and there had not been any letter from Stephen for several weeks.

Mrs. Limber began to hold communion with herself concerning this.

"Ah!" she thought, "it is coming—he is getting tired of her as he did of me. It is her turn to suffer now; but she will not suffer from his coldness as I did, she does not love him as I did; nothing could persuade me of that. What do tepid natures like hers know of real love?" her lip curled with scorn.

She took an opportunity of speaking to her step-son on the subject so much in her thoughts.

"I should have thought, Dick, you would have been doubly kind to poor Elsie now. You should try to fill the blank left in her heart by her uncle's death."

"Well, I am kind to her, I'm sure," said Dick.

"You know what I mean, you silly boy."

"But what's the use if she's thinking about Brent—I don't want to interfere with the fellow."

"Nonsense about interfering. Tell me, Dick, don't you think when a man's engaged to a woman he writes to her?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Then how can there be any thing between these two, for I have good reason to know Mr. Brent never writes to Elsie now."

"Oh! well, I don't care; I've made up my mind not to worry her any more," said Dick, doggedly, "and, apart from any thing else, it's too much trouble; it doesn't suit me to have all the love on one side."

"You've no perseverance, Dick."

"Yes, I have, in a good cause—this is a bad one. If there's any thing serious between Elsie and Brent—and, for all you say to the contrary, I think there is—it would be awfully shabby of me to take advantage of Brent being out of the way to make love to her."

Mrs. Limber raised her eyebrows, and looked at her step-son with a curling lip.

"Supposing—mind, I only say supposing—there was something between them before he went to sea," she said. "Is'n't there such a thing as a man changing his mind in regard to a woman? I've heard of such a thing, Dick," added Mrs. Limber, with a smile.

"Yes, no doubt," said Dick, sententiously, thinking of the change his own feelings had undergone toward Peggy Short. "A man does n't know what a girl's like all at once, or how she may or may not suit him.—Bother! I'm sick of girls."

By her wonderful power of intuition, Mrs. Limber seemed to guess at his thoughts.

"Well, Dick, you think quietly over what I have said; you used to take my advice, and you must know I have only your interest at heart. By the way, before you go, I've always forgot to ask you what you think about little Peggy and Mr. Gordon."

"What do you mean?" said Dick, with a little start, and getting very red.

"Your father tells me," she said, watching Dick's face with a hawk-like look while she spoke, "that he is sure Mr. Gordon admires little Peggy very much, and he should n't be surprised if there was a match there."

"What! jolly little Peggy marry that stuck-up prig!" Dick spluttered out.

"It would be a very good thing for her."

"I don't think so," he said; "Mr. Gordon may like her, but I believe he wants Elsie's money. I don't think Peggy cares a brass farthing for him."

Mrs. Limber smiled, and drew her own conclusions. She did not think it politic to pursue the subject.

Meanwhile, Elsie was becoming very anxious as the

days went by and no letter came from her lover. Not for one moment did she think that the silence was his fault. She felt sure that he had written, and that his letter, in some way or another, had miscarried ; or he was ill, and unable to write. Whatever was the cause, she was certain that he was blameless. Her trust in Stephen Brent was perfect. But she became paler and more depressed every day ; the weight of her anxiety would have been lightened, if she could have spoken of it. She wrote to Peggy and asked if she had had news of her cousin, but Peggy only answered "No," without any comment. A feeling she could scarcely explain to herself kept Elsie from having thorough confidence in Mrs. Limber, although they had been much better friends since Mr. Martin's death. One day she looked so pale, and seemed so out of spirits, that Mrs. Limber asked if she felt ill.

"I am only anxious," she answered. "I have not heard from Mr. Brent for some weeks. I fear he must be ill."

"You must not worry yourself, dear, if you don't get letters regularly. All sorts of things may happen to keep him from writing ; and sailors are proverbially bad correspondents."

"But Stephen has been a very good one," said Elsie, quietly.

"Then you must remember," Mrs. Limber went on, "that wherever a ship is stationed the officers are made a

great fuss with. They have so much gayety of one kind or another, that they have no time to think of home-friends, or for writing letters—indeed, their heads are quite turned. I remember hearing all this when I was a girl, and I made up my mind I would never fall in love with a sailor. They are all, more or less, flirts," she added, laughing.

"There are sailors and sailors," Elsie answered, gravely.

"Of course ; we all think we have got the exception. I hope you will find you have it, dear," said Mrs. Limber, as she left her.

"She is unkind to say such things," Elsie thought. "Is that her idea of giving me comfort ? It shows me how right I have been not to talk to her about Stephen."

In the evening, a note came from Mrs. Collingwood, asking Elsie to fulfil her promise to spend a week at the Hall. She proposed to drive over to fetch her the next day before luncheon.

"We have only just come down from London," she wrote, "or you would have seen me sooner. I hope, dear, you will be able to come."

Elsie returned by the messenger a glad acceptance of the invitation. Several letters had passed between her and the squire's wife while Mrs. Collingwood had been in town, and Elsie had told her friend of her uncle's wish, expressed in his will, that she should live at Hillside till she was twenty-one.

Before noon the next day Mrs. Collingwood arrived.

"This is delightful," she said, when Elsie was seated beside her in the carriage, and they were on their way to the Hall. "Now I shall have you, dear, all to myself. But how pale you are ! You do not look well, child. Has there been any thing the matter with you ? "

"No, I have been well, thank you," Elsie answered, with a graceful look. She felt inclined to tell her friend of her anxiety about Stephen, but she thought she would wait a little. "I hope you have enjoyed yourself in London ? "

"Yes, I did at first ; but I soon tire of dinners, balls, and theatres. It is really very hard work when you are 'in the swim,' as they say, and not worthy of an intellectual being. One meets some interesting people now and then, but they are rare, and the commonplace element has such supremacy among people and things that I am always glad to get back to country delights."

"Still I should think a little of it must be very pleasant," said Elsie.

"You mean you would like to try a season in London ? "

"No, no," said Elsie, laughing, "not exactly that. A few weeks would content me. I have never stayed more than a few days in London, and then it seemed a delightful place."

"So it would be, if one could enjoy it entirely in one's own way, without regard to the demands of society ; the intellectual features of London are delightful, but the frivolities weary me to death," said Mrs. Collingwood,

with a sigh. "It makes one sorry for one's kind, to see how young and old, rich and poor, hunt after pleasure and excitement in London ; and there is a sort of fascination in it," she added, "that makes one despise one's self for joining in the chase."

By the time they arrived at the Hall, Elsie felt lighter-hearted than she had done for some time ; her friend's conversation interested her and quite changed the current of her thoughts, for Mrs. Collingwood had seen and observed a good deal, and had also travelled much.

The squire welcomed Elsie cordially, and she soon felt at home in the charming old house. At Hillside, except in the entrance-hall and in the pleasant house-place, there was a certain amount of gloom in all the rooms, in spite of Mrs. Limber's efforts ; dulness was inherent in the construction of the place and its furnishings ; but at Trant Hall all was bright and airy and in good taste.

In the pleasant surroundings, and in the interesting talk of Mrs. Collingwood, Elsie saw a pleasant prospect of distraction from the anxiety about her lover which had weighed so heavily on her spirits at Hillside, and to which she felt she ought not to yield.

Mrs. Collingwood showed her the pictures 'along a bedroom gallery which she had not seen on her previous visit.

"I am going to show you your room, dear Miss Neale," she said. "I have not given you one of the grand bedchambers, because I wanted us to be near one

another. This is my door," she said, as they passed along the softly-carpeted gallery, "and this is yours."

She threw open the door of a pretty little sitting-room opening into a small, well-fitted dressing-room; beyond was a large bedroom. There were books and pictures everywhere.

"They are our craze," she said, in answer to Elsie's expression of wonder at so many books, "and I sometimes think we shall have to build a new library. Now I shall leave you; my sitting-room is next to yours, so you will always know where to find me."

Elsie sat down on a sofa in a state of dream-like content—that indescribable sense of *bien-être* which beauty and comfort in outward surroundings give to a person who has either been for a time deprived of them, or who has the faculty for such enjoyment for the first time fully gratified.

Presently a maid came and asked for her keys; but she did the unpacking so noiselessly and quickly in the dressing-room that Elsie sat dreaming on, and was surprised when a summons came for luncheon.

She did not see the squire till dinner-time, as he had gone to pay a visit some way off; then she found him a kindly host, and something even better—an intelligent companion, whose talk reminded her of her uncle Edward. He was a little old-fashioned, perhaps, and had not dipped into, and bewildered his brain with, modern theories; but then Elsie felt like a rustic in

these matters, and she thought her friend's husband delightful.

The evening was very pleasant ; the two friends sang together, and before they separated, after a long chat in Elsie's room, they had agreed to call each other by their Christian names.

They were together about a week after Elsie's arrival in Mrs. Collingwood's private sitting-room—boudoirs such rooms were then called. Elsie was reading aloud while the squire's wife drew. The book she read was "Adam Bede." This wonderful novel was just then making a great stir in the reading world, and the sayings of the inimitable Mrs Poyser and of Bartle Massey were in every one's mouth.

The door opened and Mr. Collingwood came in with the *Times* in his hand. He generally gave the ladies an hour of his company after luncheon, and Elsie put down her book.

"Don't stop for me, Miss Neale," said the squire. "What are you reading?"

"That remarkable story I was telling you about," said his wife, "and we are at a most interesting point. Go on, Elsie—we must finish the chapter. Mr. Collingwood has got his paper to amuse him."

Elsie went on with her reading. Suddenly the squire broke out with—

"Dear, dear, what's this? How terrible these shipwrecks are!—'loss of Her Majesty's ship *Europa* with all hands on board.'"

The book fell from Elsie's hand and she became deadly pale.

"What—what did you say—what ship?" she faltered out.

"Her Majesty's ship *Europa*, with all on board," repeated the squire; "dear, dear, how sad!"

"What a dreadful thing!" said Mrs. Collingwood; then she caught sight of Elsie's stricken face; she jumped up and went over to her. "Elsie, my child, what's the matter? you are as pale as a ghost."

"I—I don't feel well. I'll go to my room, please."

She rose up as she spoke—but she staggered when she tried to walk. Mrs. Collingwood looked at her husband and he gave Elsie his arm.

But when she reached her room she asked her friend not to follow her in.

"Not now," she said. "Please let me be alone."

CHAPTER II.

HOPE.

LIFE seemed all at once to have slipped away from Elsie. As she lay on the sofa—for she had flung herself there when the door closed on the pitying faces of the squire and his wife—it seemed as if she stood alone on some peak, far removed from earth,

and that her empty hands were trying to hold a grasp on life, slipping, slipping away. And yet what was life to her when Stephen had left it ! But she turned from this, and indeed from all thought . . . Her sorrow crushed all sense out of her . . . She had never known a grief like this.

She did not know how long she lay staring aimlessly at the wall before her without a thought or a wish beyond it.

At last she heard footsteps in her sitting-room.

"Is any one there ?" she raised herself a little.

Mrs. Collingwood answered, but she kept out of sight :

"Dear Elsie, it is I. I would n't knock lest you should be asleep. I have brought you some tea."

"Come in, dear," Elsie said ; "not the tea, thank you—only you—" she stopped, the sympathy in her friend's voice seemed to have called her back to existence, but she did not know how to tell her sorrow.

It was strange to see in the presence of trouble how utterly superficial was Mrs. Collingwood's affectation ; she knelt down beside Elsie, put her arm round her, and kissed her tenderly. Presently, when she saw the girl did not turn away, she whispered :

"Some one you loved was in that ship, dear Elsie ?"

Elsie clung to her convulsively, and sobs burst from her. Till now she had been still as marble.

"He was your dear love," her friend whispered, clasping her close to her bosom. "Ah ! my Elsie, what can I do to comfort you ?"

Elsie's sobs checked speech, but after a while, as her friend still knelt beside her, she whispered :

"You are doing the best you can."

After this she asked to be left to herself, and her friend obeyed her wishes. Mrs. Collingwood had not known great sorrow, but something in Elsie's stricken face awed her, and taught her how to act in the face of such a grief as this. She gathered too, from her previous observation, that Elsie knew how to seek higher comfort than any she could give, and she left the poor wounded heart in peace.

To what seemed peace outwardly ; but it was long before Elsie could school herself to bear her trial as Mrs. Collingwood thought she was bearing it. She could not give up Stephen. It had been a bitter grief to lose her uncle, but the great consolation of that parting had been the hope that by the end of the year her lover would come back. That had been a hope to lift her beyond present sorrow. She did not know how intensely she loved Stephen Brent till the blow came. They had so soon been parted that her love lay in her heart like an unopened flower ready to expand at the touch of her lover, but almost hidden from her own knowledge. Now it burst into full bloom, and she writhed in mute anguish.

If Stephen was not to be hers, how could she go on living without him ? How long the years seemed behind her ! and she was only twenty. What a dreary expanse of life offered itself !

Life at Hillside, with its uncongenial associations ; life

in the cold outside world, where, except Peggy and her mother, she had not a real friend ! But all this she thrust away. It was trivial and selfish. Her one thought was Stephen. How had he perished ? Had death been swift and sudden, or had it come slowly ; by starvation, or by any of those sad ways one heard of in shipwrecks ?

Perhaps she should never know ; it was a secret buried in the sea.

But after some hours of this keen agony light came to her darkened soul. What was she doing ? She was no better than a heathen, when she said she could not give up Stephen.

When Mrs. Collingwood stole in to see her again, she found her friend with red, swollen eyes, but she felt happier about her ; the strained, despairing look of agony had gone ; there was deep sorrow, even more pathetic than in the look that went before, but there was less to alarm. Mrs. Collingwood had thought of spending the night beside her friend, but when she saw the change in Elsie she felt sure that she was best left alone.

Elsie felt that henceforth she was alone in the world. She began to wonder that night, as she lay with dry, wide-open eyes looking into the darkness, whether any thing was real when so great a change in the seeming of things could be wrought by one event. When she reached Trant Hall, she had thoroughly enjoyed her pleasant rooms, and the interest scattered over the old manor-house ; now the place was altogether irksome ; it seemed

so to jar with her sorrow that she would gladly have exchanged all its beauty and luxury for even a rougher and humbler home than Hillside. She shrank, however, from the thought of returning to the farm ; she shrank especially from Mrs. Limber ; when she remembered their last talk about Stephen it seemed as if she had been a prophet of evil.

She had asked Mrs. Collingwood to bring her the newspaper that she might read the account of the shipwreck as far as it was known, and she had read it weeping just before she lay down to rest.

She fell asleep at last, exhausted, and for about an hour she slept heavily. . . . She waked with a start,—she was saying over to herself the account of the shipwreck. “It is believed all have perished.” . . . At first she was drowsy, and scarcely conscious, but soon she roused completely.

Were these words in the account, she asked herself, or merely the creation of a dream. She could not rest till she had solved this doubt, and soon she was out of bed ; striking a light, she searched eagerly for the newspaper, her fair hair falling in wavy masses over her shoulders.

It lay on the table before the sofa ; she seated herself, and read the well-remembered paragraph. Yes, there were the words, “It is believed.” She had not dreamed them.

There was some hope ; then her thankfulness overflowed. She knelt down and thanked God for this ray in

the darkness, and she prayed earnestly that it might be His will to restore Stephen to her. Who could say what might not have happened? the very news itself was, after all, not a recorded fact, for it was not said that any one had seen the shipwreck, though the ship was reported missing.

If any were saved, Stephen would be among them; her heart told her so; it seemed almost to speak aloud to her in the dead stillness of the house.

"He is not dead," she said, softly, as she crept back to bed; "he will come back to me."

And she soon fell asleep again.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. LIMBER HEARS THE NEWS.

IN the afternoon of the same day, Mr. Limber was seated with his wife in the parlor at Hillside, also reading the paper. Suddenly he gave an exclamation.

"What's the matter now?" said Mrs. Limber; "what agricultural prodigy has startled you?"

"What was the name of Mr. Brent's ship, my dear?"

"The *Europa*. What of it?"

A strange thrill stirred her blood as she asked the question.

"There's bad news about it. I hope to heaven it is n't true."

"What do you mean? Let me see the paper." She snatched it from his hand, and began to look eagerly, but the lines of print seemed to dance before her eyes. "Where is it? What does it say? Show it to me," she said, vehemently.

"There, there," the farmer pointed with his huge forefinger to the short paragraph in the paper, "don't you see? it's big enough—'Foundering of the *Europa*. All aboard lost.'"

"All lost! My God!" she said, with a gasp; she put her hand to her heart and fell back in her chair, her eyes half closed.

"Harrie! Harrie!" cried the alarmed farmer, taking her hand—he had never seen her like this before. "God bless me! my dear pet, what is it? you're as cold as a stone."

"Nothing—nothing," she said, faintly; then she gasped: "Don't touch me; I shall be better in a minute. Some water—get me some water; don't—don't tell any one."

Mr. Limber ran out of the room.

"Oh, my God, my God!" she wailed, "is it true? It can't be true. Oh, my darling, my darling!" She felt for the paper which had fallen beside her on the floor, but when she got it, it shook so in her hand, and her sight was so dim, she could not read a word. "Oh, it's horrible!"—she panted for breath.

"Here, my pet," said the farmer, coming back into the room, "drink this; there's a dash of spirit in it."

He held the glass to her while she drank. "There, there, my poor dear ; what an idiot I was to read it out so sudden. Poor tender-hearted little pet ! "

The color was coming back into his wife's face.

"That will do," she said ; "it was the sudden shock. I feel so for poor Elsie, poor girl ; there is no harm in telling now, and I 've kept her secret all this while. She and St—Mr. Brent were engaged."

"Poor dear !" said Mr. Limber, "I thought as much all through ; 't will be sad news for her. But wait ; let 's read all it says. Yes, it 's too true—every soul 's lost."

Just then Dick came into the room. He looked from one face to the other ; he saw that something unusual was taking place.

"What are you both looking so scared about ? " he said.

"There 's bad news for Elsie, Dick, in that paper," said his father ; "poor Brent's ship has gone down, and all aboard of her—not a soul saved."

Dick looked stunned—indeed, he felt as if he had received a sudden blow.

"Brent drowned !—poor fellow !" he exclaimed, in a horrified tone.

Mrs. Limber shuddered and put her hand over her eyes.

"Yes," said Mr. Limber, "I read it out sudden to Harrie and frightened her. It is believed every soul on board has perished."

Dick's heart gave a sudden leap, but he recoiled with horror from the feeling that stirred it.

"And what you and me, Dick, thought was the case is true," added the farmer. "Elsie was engaged to the poor fellow; she had confided this to mother under promise of secrecy. Poor dear child 't will be a dreadful blow to her; scarce has she got a bit free of her grief for her uncle Martin, when this comes on her. God help her, poor dear girl!"

"Will she know of it yet, father, do you think?"

"Sure to; the squire's safe to have read it in the paper, and everybody 'll be talking of it; but I hope it has n't come sudden on her."

"I hope not," said Dick.

"Like a fool, I blurted it out, and gave mother a terrible turn. D' ye feel better now, my pet?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Limber; outwardly she was calm, but the overmastering agony that had seized her heart yet remained there as a dull ache. "You know it was dreadful, Dick, for me when I thought of Elsie's feelings; the news almost took away my senses for a few minutes."

"It is a bad business," said Dick; "poor dear Elsie has had hard lines of it."

Dick's simple nature was puzzled by his step-mother's conduct; he could not understand how, with the knowledge it appeared she possessed of the engagement between the young sailor and his cousin, she could urge him, as she had urged him, to go on courting Elsie.

"I felt sure they were engaged,"—Dick looked sternly at Mrs. Limber,—“and so did”—he hesitated—“so did Peggy Short.”

Mrs. Limber gave a little start. Dick spoke as if he had a right to Peggy's confidence.

“That could only have been guesswork,” she said ; “no one knew but me, not even Mr. Martin.” Then she remembered, and looked keenly at Dick. “It was that made me think he meant nothing serious, poor fellow—it looked bad his asking her to keep it secret”; and then her blame of the man she had loved struck the agony still deeper, and she burst into convulsive sobs.

“Poor girl—poor Harrie!—there, there,”—the farmer put his hand on his wife's shonlder, and looked at Dick to claim his admiration for such extraordinary tender-heartedness,—“drink a little water, my pet; you must calm yourself against Elsie comes. I shall drive over to Trant Hall the first thing to-morrow morning,” the farmer went on, “and see how the poor dear is bearing it; perhaps she will like to come back here at once. D' ye feel well enough now, my pet, to be left alone?” he said tenderly to his wife.

“Yes, I had rather be alone,” said Mrs. Limber, ungraciously.

“There's a piece of business waiting for me that this bad news put out of my head. I want you to go with me, Dick. Poor thing! she's quite unhinged. I never knew such a tender, feeling heart,” said the farmer to

his son, as they walked along. "I b'lieve she loves Elsie quite like a daughter. We must all make much of her now, poor girl."

"Yes," Dick sighed.

If Stephen Brent was to be drowned, he wished he had met his fate before he had ever set eyes on Elsie Neale. It seemed unaccountable that the sailor should just have stepped into his cousin's life to tangle and spoil it, and then to pass out, leaving a sad memory, to cloud the brightness of her future. And then the kind-hearted fellow thought of Elsie, and his heart grew heavy again. What a woful home-coming hers would be !

Meantime, Mrs. Limber sat where they had left her, as colorless as the dinner-cloth, which had not yet been taken away. Her dull, strained gaze fell on this presently, and, with an effort, she recollected that the servant would be coming into the room. She could not indulge her grief there.

But when she had reached her room and locked the door, her manner changed. She sank down in a heap, and beat her head against the floor, sobbing wildly and unrestrainedly.

"Oh, my love !" she cried, "my only love !" Then she lay still and white with her anguish, moaning from time to time—there was no one to hear. She was so utterly miserable ; she did not shrink from falsehood, as another woman might have shrunk, but it was so wretched that she must lie to hide even natural feelings—that when she was

torn with grief for her dear, dead love, she must say she grieved for Elsie—Elsie whom she detested and despised.

It was not possible to Harriet Limber to acknowledge that a man she loved could love any one else ; nor could she even acknowledge that Elsie was really attractive. "Just a pretty face,"—she refused to believe that others could see more than this, and she had been secretly pleased by her step-son's hesitation about her until she found out his admiration for Peggy. That was simple infatuation for a little saucy-faced chit, with a turn-up nose, and reddish hair, and eyes that no one would look at if they were not used so freely.

But she was not thinking of Peggy now, only of her "dear, dead love," as she called Stephen in her frantic bursts of grief. "He would have been mine," she said. "In my wretched life I have always had to keep my thoughts hidden ; but I knew and I hoped one day I must have been free, and then he would have been mine." She got up, and looked at her disfigured face, and pushed the tangled hair out of her swimming eyes. "Yes, a strong love must hold love, and there is no strength of any kind in Elsie. She is obstinate, like all timid, weak people ; but there is neither passion nor daring in her nature. She would have made the dear fellow miserable."

CHAPTER IV.

THE VICAR "DROPS DIAMONDS AND PEARLS."

MR. LIMBER did not like his errand. As he drove slowly to Trant Hall, he wished more and more he had asked his wife to prepare the way by writing. If Elsie were to faint what was he to do with her? Certainly she had borne the news of her uncle's death very quietly and patiently; but then this was different. And now that he was by himself, away from the atmosphere of his wife's judgment, Mr. Limber felt troubled on another point. His wife, no doubt, had had the best intentions in keeping Elsie's secret; but she had been forced to say what was not true, for she had positively denied the fact of the engagement, and by so doing she had given indirect hope to Dick. Mr. Limber loved his wife dearly, but he was very true and loyal, and this flaw in his idol vexed him as a fly vexes a horse; he could not shake off the annoyance. "I suppose women think all's fair in love," he sighed to himself, "though it ain't my motto."

He had driven over so early that he reached the Hall before the squire had finished reading his letters. It was a relief when he was shown into the library to find Mr. Collingwood alone there, though he had asked for Miss Neale.

"This is very sad, Mr. Limber," and then the two men sat down opposite one another.

Up stairs Elsie was telling her friend the story of her love, but Mr. Collingwood only knew that she had lost a dear friend on board the *Europa*. He was deeply grieved when Mr. Limber told him there had been an engagement between her and Brent.

"Brent—Brent!" he said. "The name is familiar to me. I think this poor fellow was at school with my youngest brother. He is at sea too, but he was n't in the *Europa*."

"How does she bear it, Mr. Collingwood?"

The farmer spoke in a shy, subdued voice, as if he feared Elsie wou'd hear him.

"Well, I can hardly tell." Mr. Collingwood looked puzzled. "Yesterday I read out the news in a sudden, abrupt way, and it quite knocked her over. She was very poorly all the evening, my wife said, and kept her room, but this morning she came down to breakfast, and was almost cheerful, though she looks ill."

"I thought she 'd wish to come home," the farmer said. "so I drove over at once."

The squire went to find his wife, and presently Elsie came in alone.

She looked pale and tired, but her composure surprised her uncle.

She thanked him when he expressed his sympathy and said that his wife had told him of the engagement.

"It is a terrible blow for a young thing like you, my dear. I can't tell you how much I feel it."

He blew his nose vigorously.

"Thank you, dear uncle," Elsie said. "I can't help feeling very sad and anxious, but I shall go on hoping. Some of the crew may have been saved."

The farmer shook his head.

"Better give him up at once, my dear. You 'll only wear your heart out, and have to give him up in the end. Don't go on pining and fretting, Elsie ; it has driven girls crazy before now. You 'd best give up, my dear child."

Elsie shook her head.

"I suppose every one will be against me," she said. "Mr. Collingwood says just what you do ; but I cannot give up hope, uncle. It cheers me, and it harms no one else ; so please let me have my own way."

Mrs. Collingwood, too, had expressed herself so strongly against the idea of hope that Elsie was not sorry to return for the present to Hillside, so as to escape further discussion with her friend. She promised to return and finish her visit in the summer.

When they reached the farm, Mrs. Limber stood waiting for them in the porch. She had evidently been crying, and there was a deeper expression of sorrow on her face than there was on Elsie's.

"My poor dear child !" she said ; and then she put both arms round Elsie, and clasped her tightly.

Elsie kissed her, but this public show of sympathy did not touch her. It seemed artificial ; but presently, when Dick took her hand, and pressed it tightly in his without

saying a word, tears rushed to her eyes, and for a moment or two hope grew indistinct.

"Mr. Roberts has called in, and when he heard the news he said he would wait to see you, my dear ; he's in the parlor," Mrs. Limber said.

Elsie had an uneasy remembrance of the vicar's mode of administering consolation, and went unwillingly to the parlor.

Her smile, as she shook hands, disconcerted Mr. Roberts ; he had carefully prepared, on his way from the parsonage, a set of trite sayings, also texts bearing on the sin of giving way to sorrow, and the duty of bearing crosses with cheerfulness ; the ground seemed cut from under his feet by this reception, and he could only shake his head and say he was sorry in a quite ordinary manner.

"It is always sad to hear of sudden death—sudden death," he said, impressively, "but more especially so in the case of the young, taken unprepared—ah, sad indeed, most sad ! I do not wonder at your grief, my dear young lady,"—he was dropping each word as if he meant it to sink into her mind separately,—“and I trust you will be supported in resignation to the will of a higher Power—yes, a higher Power.”

Elsie had sat listening with downcast eyes ; now she raised her head and looked at him.

"I cannot give up hope," she said ; "there is no positive account of the shipwreck, and—and I believe Mr. Brent has been saved." She blushed deeply ; her deli-

cate ears glowed like rosebuds, and her eyes fell beneath the vicar's. It was the first time she had spoken of her secret to a stranger, for Mr. Collingwood had scarcely said any thing to her since he read out the sad news ; he had been contented to press her hand in token of silent sympathy.

The vicar threw his head back, he almost snorted—he had got the challenge he wanted.

“Hope is a Divine gift—Divine, I grant you this ; but, my dear young lady, we must be very sure, before we indulge it, that our hope is built on sure foundations—sure and steadfast ; and that, instead of meekly following the guidance of an angel of mercy, we are not being lured to sorrow and despair by the—the mocking will-of-the-wisp of our own self-willed imagination—imagination. Ha, my dear Miss Neale, imagination is a most pernicious faculty—it does a great deal of mischief in the world.”

Elsie felt saddened and oppressed by his pompous manner, but she could not keep back a smile.

“It is as much a gift as hope,” she said, quietly.

The vicar gave her a reproving look. He did not permit even Mr. Collingwood to argue with him, though he was, like himself, a University man. In Mr. Roberts' opinion, the vicar of the parish must of necessity be the best-informed,—the best-taught man in the place on all subjects ; any subjects which had not come within his range were not subjects necessary to be acquainted with.

Clever men were objectionable, but women who thought for themselves and spent time in mental cultivation were total mistakes ; and, when they were young and still amenable to improvement, should be reprov'd and set in their place.

"My dear Miss Neale," he said, "we will not dwell further on your sorrow. I was very glad to hear you had set up a knitting-class ; there you are in your true vocation—I give you free leave—free leave"—he waved his hand majestically—"to teach as much sewing and knitting as you please—music, too, if you like ; but I warn you against ideas—as ideas, they will tend to make you hard and unwomanly"—he checked himself, for he had spoken with some warmth ; "but this is not to the purpose in hand. What concerns me chiefly now is that you should not yield to a delusive hope, an ignis fatuus that may lead you to waste the best years of your life in what, remember, my dear young lady, is, after all, rebellion against the will of a higher Power."

Elsie felt that there was some truth in these last words, and she looked up at him with a sweet, subdued expression in her blue eyes.

"Thank you," she said, gently, "I will try to remember your advice ; but, indeed, I do not mean to go on hoping unreasonably. One often hears of shipwrecked men being picked up by some foreign outward-bound ship, and so lost for months, perhaps, to their friends and their country. I earnestly hope—if the news is true—that this

has happened to Mr. Brent ; but time only can prove the truth of my idea." She paused ; she was shy at making such a long speech, and her lips quivered when she remembered that no one shared her hope.

" Then "—Mr. Roberts had risen, and his square, portly form towered over Elsie as he shook hands with her—" then, if I understand you correctly, you refuse to give up hope until some time has passed ;" he shook his head compassionately. " Well, good-day to you. I am sorry to have been of so little use."

Elsie followed him to the gate, but he took no further notice of her, nor did he ask to see Mr. Limber, who was waiting in the house-place for the end of the interview.

Elsie was very silent through the evening, but she looked gratefully at Dick for the many little attentions he showed, and when she took her candle from him at night, she said, in a low voice :

" Thank you, dear Dick. How good you are to me !"

The farmer had scarcely taken his eyes from his niece, and he had been surprised by Dick's gentle thoughtfulness. When Elsie was gone, he rose, and clapped his son's shoulder.

" That's right, old chap ! You go on as you've begun, and you'll win poor little Elsie, after all."

" I was n't thinking of that." Dick looked savage. " I suppose a fellow may show a little feeling without meaning any thing by what he does ?"

" Yes, indeed, Richard." Mrs. Limber had grown so

angry in watching her husband, that she rejoiced in this chance of snubbing him. "I wonder at you ; it 's quite too early days to think of courting Elsie, though I expect she 'll soon get over it—fair-haired women are never constant, you know."

"Ar' n't they, my pet?" he said. "Then I 'm glad your hair 's dark."

Mrs. Limber turned away sharply, and lit her own candle.

"I 'm too tired to say good-night," she said abruptly, and she went away.

CHAPTER V.

MR. LIMBER HAS HIS OWN WAY AGAIN.

"HARRIE," said Mr. Limber to his wife. She was seated beside him in his business-room, helping him with his accounts, he sat at his desk, she at a small table close by. "I say, Harrie—"

"Well?" she said, not looking up from her papers.

He cleared his throat several times, and got up from his chair, and sat down again.

"I 've been thinking, my dear, it 's about time you sent that invitation to Miss Peggy and her mother."

"I don't mean to send it," she said, coldly. "I can't have that foolish little girl here again, turning Dick's

head with her nonsense, and upsetting him with Elsie. You know how she went on ; and I 'm sure her mother is a bore."

Mr. Limber laughed.

"Poor old Dick ! You 're a regular dragon over him, my pet ; but, he seems so fond of his cousin again, I don't think Miss Peggy would upset him with her. But, since this grief has come upon Elsie, 't would be a comfort for her to see that lively young miss."

"I can't help that, Mr. Limber. I don't mean to ask her, so don't let us argue about it."

"But, my pet, I have asked 'em already. You know I told you I did, when I was there that time at Wortham. I can't be worse than my word."

"You did it without consulting me."

"That 's so ; you were n't by, you see. But, having done it, let 's make the best of it : and there 's no real harm in the girl, if so be as she is a bit flirty."

"Richard, you 're such an innocent, you don't half know what a girl is capable of if she 's set her mind on a thing. I tell you Peggy Short is bent on getting Dick to marry her. I don't approve of it, and I will not give her the least encouragement ; if she 's asked here, she may fairly say we gave her encouragement, and I'm sure that mother of hers would plot and plan from morning till night."

Mr. Limber looked thoroughly puzzled ; he puffed out his cheeks and scratched his left ear. With all his easy-

going ways and amiability of temper, there was a spice of doggedness in his nature. He liked little Peggy, and he had set his heart on having her to the farm for the sake of Elsie ; still he hated to put himself in opposition to his wife.

"Come, come, Harrie," he went on, "don't stand out so stiff against me, but say you 'll do it,—come now."

"Very well," she said, sulkily, inwardly vowing that he should suffer for her compliance.

"There 's a beauty," he said, coming up and giving her a hearty kiss—"that 's my own little duck."

He was going out of the room ; at the door he turned and came back again.

"Look here, my pet, there 's a bit of business I can do in Wortham better personally than by letter, so just say to Miss Peggy I'm coming to fetch her, and I shall be there the day after to-morrow. Don't bother about those accounts any more to-day, my pet—you 'll make your head ache."

Mrs. Limber sat, after her husband had left the room, staring straight in front of her, and frowning.

"If she comes," she thought, "she shall not have a pleasant time of it. The little creature has a spirit of her own, and she 'll soon take herself off again. Why did I give way to Richard, when I know it 's best for the girl not to come? She 'll only breed mischief." Her face softened a little. "How fond he is of me ! Poor old man ! I wish I could love him better. I know as

well as I know I sit here, that his heart ached because he would not give in to me about Peggy. I never knew him so obstinate before about any thing—except marrying me, poor old fellow !—but 's all because he thinks the little chit will cheer Elsie." Her face darkened again. "Elsie ; how I hate the name ! I wish I had never seen her. She comes in my way at every turn. Oh ! Stephen, you did not know what love you threw away when you slighted mine ; what sort of love could she have given you compared with mine ? My God !" she almost shrieked, "what am I talking of ? My beautiful love is dead. Gone from me for ever." She burst into passionate tears.

Gradually she became more composed, and, after a little, her thoughts took a new turn.

"I don't understand Dick's manner now with his cousin. He avoided the subject when I tried to speak to him about it ; but I must have some talk with him before that little flirt comes. He will spoil all his chances with Elsie, if he goes on with Peggy in the foolish way he did when she was here before. If he does, and Elsie has the spirit of a mouse, she will resent it.

The morning her husband started for Wortham, Mrs. Limber said to her step-son :

"I want to have a little talk with you, Dick. Come into your father's room ; we shall not be disturbed there."

Dick had grown to shrink from "talks" with his step-mother. He followed her slowly, and stood leaning against the door.

"Sit down, dear," she said. "I want to talk seriously about Elsie. I have several times, lately, tried to speak to you about her, but you have cut me short. Now I must say what I want to say; and please don't interrupt me." The one thing in daily life that gave Mrs. Limber acute pain was the mention of Stephen Brent's name. To be able to say it with indifference was the constant task she set herself. It was a hard struggle now to speak calmly. "While Stephen Brent was alive, in justice to his claim on Elsie, I forbore to urge you in regard to your cousin—and I can understand that you felt a delicacy in pressing your love upon her—but, now that he—that the engagement is broken, it is time, Dick, that you thought of yourself again."

"Yes, I know," said Dick, simply.

Mrs. Limber had expected opposition; this simple acquiescence surprised her.

"Then you are again thinking of asking her to be your wife?" she said.

"Certainly I am thinking of it; but I do not think I have much chance. Elsie and I are very good friends, but you know she is positive in her belief that Brent is alive, and that he escaped in the shipwreck."

"Would to God that I could think so too," Mrs. Limber burst out.

Dick stared.

"Why, Mrs. Limber, I thought you were glad he was out of the way because he interfered with your plans," said Dick, bluntly.

For a moment she was off her guard.

"I could not be so wicked ! I'd give any thing to see him alive"—then she saw the astonishment painted on her step-son's face. "How can you think me so heartless, Dick ?" she said, with a forced laugh. "But don't let us talk any more about that part of the subject. Elsie is free, and you would like her for your wife."

"Yes, I know I should be a lucky fellow to get her for my wife."

"I had no idea her fortune would be—"

"Hang the money !" interrupted Dick, impetuously. "It's Elsie herself I care for ; but what's the use of talking, I don't believe she'll ever listen to me."

"I don't agree with you, and I think you should take my advice. You have only to follow out a system of constant attention, to show her how entirely devoted you are to her, and I am sure in the end you will succeed."

"Oh ! it's very easy to talk," said Dick, despondently ; "I wish I could think the same."

"But you must n't be faint-hearted ; and, above all, you must not disgust your cousin by flirting with Peggy Short when she comes to stay here."

Dick smiled, but did not speak.

"Why don't you answer me, Dick ? You will not flirt with Peggy ?"

"Oh ! I'll take care about that. Elsie shall have no cause to complain of me."

"My dear Dick, I am glad to find you so reasonable ;"

she smiled at him in the old way, which had won him so completely when she first came to Hillside. "You know I have only your happiness at heart."

"Thank you," said Dick, getting up, and shaking her hand heartily.

"Be prudent and persevering, and you 'll win her," she added.

Mr. Limber, as soon as he arrived at Wortham, proceeded to transact his business. This done, he went to Mrs. Short's. The mother and daughter were expecting him, and they received him warmly.

"How is dear Elsie?" said Peggy. "From her letters we have not thought her well for some time past. She has seemed quite out of spirits."

"Yes, poor girl;" said the farmer; "she has been sadly down, and no wonder. You see that business coming on the top of her uncle's death was a great upset to her."

"What business?" said Mrs. Short.

"Why, your poor nephew's shipwreck, ma'am."

Mother and daughter looked at each other.

"Ah, that was a terrible thing," said Peggy, with a sigh.

"'T was a shock for all of us," said Mr. Limber, "mixed up among us as he was, as you might say, but 't was terrible indeed for poor dear Elsie—my heart bled for her, poor child. To think of their parting like that at Hillside, and not knowing 't was their last meeting—'t was

pitiful !” The tender-hearted man took out his handkerchief and blew his nose vigorously.

“Poor dear Elsie !” said Mrs. Short.

“The poor darling !” said Peggy. “I suppose they engaged themselves when dear Steenie went to Hillside just before he sailed ?”

“That’s so, as far as I can understand.” said Mr. Limber ; “and now you know why Elsie’s so down, and would like you to be with her, my dear ; you’ll cheer her up mainly”—he looked affectionately at Peggy—“so I hope you’ll spare her, ma’am, to go back with me at once.”

“You will not surely go back to-night, Mr. Limber ?” said Mrs. Short. “I hope you will spend this evening with us.”

“Well, ma’am,” said the farmer, scratching his ear, “I promised Mrs. Limber, if I found Miss Peggy was ready, I’d do it all in a day, an’ I told Dick to be ready with the trap at Blackwater this evening.”

“Oh, yes, I can go at once—can’t I, mamma ?” said Peggy, turning away to hide the rising color in her cheeks. “My things are nearly packed.”

“Yes, my dear, the sooner you get to Elsie the better. We’ll go and finish your packing ; dinner will be ready in half an hour.”

“It’s very kind of you, I’m sure,” said the farmer, with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER VI.

PEGGY AT HILLSIDE AGAIN.

PEGGY could hardly wait till she reached her room, then she flung her arms around Elsie.

"You poor dear!" she said, "both mother and I always thought it about you and Stephen, and then, when you said nothing, I did not know what to think."

She placed Elsie in a chair, and smoothed her hair tenderly with her plump hand.

"I could not tell you," Elsie said. "I had promised Stephen—we both thought Uncle Edward ought to know first. I meant to tell you as soon as I had told him."

"I feel so wicked, dear." Peggy knelt down and hid her face on Elsie's knees. "I was quite angry with you when I heard the dear fellow had been here—I guessed it all then—did you notice how cross I was?"

"Who told you he had been here?"

"Your cousin." Peggy looked conscious; she remembered under what circumstances that news had been told her, and she wondered if she should get such another walk with Dick Limber.

"I might have told you when I came back to Wortham," Elsie said, "but I could not bear to speak about it. The thought of Stephen would always bring joy and happiness, and it seemed a wrong to Uncle Edward just then."

They sat hand in hand.

"And you would have been our cousin"—there was a sob in Peggy's voice—"a sister really, for he was always like a brother to me."

Elsie pressed the hand that held hers.

"Does your mother give up hope?"—Peggy looked up with widely-opened eyes.

"There is nothing to hope for, dear. I do not see how any thing can ever be known about the shipwreck. That seems the saddest part of all."

Elsie looked very sad; then she fixed her eyes on Peggy.

"Peggy, tell me, don't you think if a thing happens once it may happen again?"

"Of course it may."

"Well, then, I cannot understand why people are so faithless and faint-hearted about—about this; there are plenty of stories, old stories and modern ones, too, about shipwrecked castaway sailors returning after a time to their friends.

Peggy had risen up from her knees; she looked eager and excited.

"Then you really think there is a hope of seeing him again?—oh! my darling Steenie, how I shall jump for joy when I see your bonny face. I remember now, when your uncle came to see us, he said you had a crotchet in your head; but I paid no attention, I could only think of getting to you as fast as possible,—you have been so tried, you poor dear."

"Then you agree to hope?" said Elsie—it was such comfort after the universal disbelief to find one friend who would sympathize with her, that, when Peggy nodded, she jumped up and kissed her enthusiastically. "That's a dear girl; you have done me more good than you can guess. I feel better than I have done since I came back to Hillside; if you have a chance, Peggy dear, you will say it to Uncle Limber. He thinks a good deal of you."

"Does he? I'm sure he's very kind," Peggy blushed with pleasure. "It was so good of him to come and fetch me; I don't think I should have come if he had not," she lowered her voice; "I did not want to see his wife again."

"Oh, Peggy, you would have come when you knew I wanted you?"

"Well, I suppose I must have come when I heard about you and Stephen. I believe mother wanted to come too; she kept on saying, 'Poor dear Elsie, poor bereaved child,' and crying all the time she was helping me to pack, for your uncle did not give us much time. I hardly seem to take it in yet, or to believe that I am here. Now go away, darling. I shall never be ready while I have your dear face to look at."

Peggy wanted to be alone. She was startled at the agitation into which she had been thrown by the sight of Dick Limber, and she had resolved to be so extremely careful, not to give "that woman," as her mother called Mrs. Limber, any chance of annoying her.

"It is so foolish of me to feel like this," she said, as she stood before the glass, trying to make her hair take the most becoming waves she could; "it is because we live almost shut up like nuns."

No—Peggy told herself she was not going to be silly—Mr. Dick Limber was no more to her than one of his father's calves were; she should treat him with complete indifference.

When she came down, she found Elsie waiting to take her to the arbor, where the tea had been spread on the wooden table.

"I thought 't would be a treat to you, my dear, to have your tea here," the farmer said, "living in a town as you do."

"How kind you are!" and Peggy shot him a grateful look, which made Mrs. Limber raise her head and pinch her lips, as if her propriety had been wounded.

Elsie was surprised by Dick's silent manner; he spoke so little to Peggy, though he was ceremonious in his politeness to her.

"Dick," his cousin said at last, "you have often asked me to go to Buckhurst Hill, and I have not been once this year—suppose we go to-morrow. I should like you to see it in summer-time," she said to Peggy.

Peggy could not help blushing, but she felt that Mrs. Limber was looking at her, and tried to look unconcerned.

"I should like it of all things. Last time your cousin

gave me a kind of Barmecides' feast, by telling me about the flowers he had gathered there, though, I believe, we did find a few primroses." She darted a saucy look at Dick. His change of manner tormented her.

"You believe!" he growled, but he did not trust himself to meet her eyes. "Why,"—he addressed the table generally—"I gathered quite a large bunch of flowers and carried them home for you."

"So you did," said Peggy, penitently; "but I have such a bad memory."

She did not say this heartily. She knew that some of those primroses were laid by among her choicest treasures, and, worst of all, as she looked up again, she met Mrs. Limber's eyes full of vexation and distrust.

"We will take a basket, when we go," Elsie said. She was anxious to restore the good understanding between her friend and her cousin; "you will see what a nosegay we shall bring back."

But Peggy was conscious that the feeling of constraint increased, and she longed to break through it.

"What a charming place this is!" she said, looking through the round opening at the end of the summer-house. "How delightful it must be to live here always!"

The farmer was looking at her admiringly. If Elsie would not have Dick, he thought he could be very fond of such a sweet little daughter-in-law as Peggy.

"Richard!"—Mrs. Limber's voice sounded so sharp that he started—"I want you in the house-place, please

dear," she ended, softly ; and she went out of the summer-house, and along the garden till she reached the porch.

Mr. Limber did not want to be disturbed ; he was very happy, and it amused him to watch Peggy's bright face, and he had not finished his tea.

"Well, my dear"—he smiled genially at the girl as he rose to follow his wife—"I wish you were here oftener. It does one good to see how easy you are pleased."

"What a dear man that is !" said Peggy ; "he would soon spoil me." She looked at Dick, but he stood with his hands in his pockets staring out over the downs.

Pixie came bounding into the summer-house and gave Peggy a rapturous greeting.

"Oh, you dear dog ! and I 've not seen you for ever so long. Oh, may I give her some cake, please ?" and she flung a bit along the path and ran after it with Pixie.

Elsie did not follow her friend ; she stood looking at Dick.

"What is the matter ?" she said—"you don't seem a bit like yourself ; you and Peggy were such friends in the winter, and now you are quite stiff ; you have not quarrelled, have you ?"

"What on earth should we quarrel about ? I like Miss Short very much ; she 's your friend to begin with."

"Well, yes, she is quite the dearest friend I have, Dick ; but don't you think she 's a very nice girl ?"

"Very nice—you could not like any one who was not nice. I 'm sorry you think I don't behave well to her ;

I did n't mean it—you know I could not bear to vex you, Elsie." He looked tenderly at her, and the girl thought how she had wronged him, how unselfish and full of sympathy he was ; she held out her hand.

"Thank you, dear Dick ; be as kind to her as you can, for she 's sensitive, and I am afraid Mrs. Limber does n't like her. I don't think you 'll find it hard to be kind to Peggy." She smiled up in his eyes, and Dick thought how sweet she was—how much sweeter and gentler than Peggy.

"Mrs. Limber will get on all right with her now," he said, significantly. "Come along, Elsie ; let us go and see what she 's doing with the governor."

Dick had seen his step-mother's eyes, and he felt sure his father was "catching it," as he phrased it ; he knew that the best pacifier for Mrs. Limber was to see him and Elsie together. Mrs. Limber had waited in the house-place till her husband came ; then she said :

"Richard, dear, if you don't help me, I shall never manage that girl."

"What girl ?" the farmer's surprise angered his wife.

"Oh, you know well enough—Peggy Short. I did not want her here, but, now she is here, she is welcome to stay, for I rather think her visit will do her good."

"I 'm sure I hope so, my dear."

"Yes, yes, but you must n't spoil her ; you are such a dear innocent, you are no match for a forward girl like that."

"I don't call her forward ;" the farmer put his hands in his pockets and looked dogged ; "she 's only lively."

"Oh, very well ; but she is what women call bold—can't you see she's bent on flinging herself at Dick's head ; and he does n't want her, any one can see it."

"He was very partial to her when she was here before."

"Now, Richard"—she gave a little playful stamp—"how many times must I remind you that all men are not like you ? You would not dream of amusing yourself with one girl while your heart was set on another ; but that was Dick's case. He has loved Elsie all through, but as long as he suspected there was any one else, he strove against it. Now, you just wait and see whether he will not set Peggy aside for Elsie. It will be Peggy's own fault, too ; no man likes too much encouragement. I declare, what she said just now was too shameless ; it drove me away."

The farmer drew out one hand from its pocket, and slowly rubbed the favorite spot behind his ear. He was perplexed, but unconvinced.

"I saw no harm in any thing she said."

"Well, you are the blindest, kindest old dear"—Mrs. Limber actually pinched her husband's cheek, and gave him a smile that warmed his heart. "But what would you have thought of me, when I came on a visit here, if I had *said I wanted always to live at Hillside ?*"

"Ah, but then you were more collected and quiet ; you

did n't use to say wild, thoughtless things, as Peggy does. I warrant you she's not in earnest half her time."

"I'm not so sure of that, Richard, and remember, a woman sees clearer than a man does about a girl; she is not glamour'd and made a fool of."

Mr. Limber's reply was cut short; as he stood facing the window, Dick passed it, walking with Elsie.

"Look there," he said, pointing to them. "They are a fine pair to look at, sure—ly; so made for one another, my word, they are! Leave 'em alone, and they'll come as right as a trivet. You always said how 't would be, did n't you, my pet? I wonder—"

He checked himself. He was just going to wonder what had become of Peggy.

CHAPTER VII.

PEGGY AND DICK "ARE TWO."

SOME days went by. Peggy saw that, when the excitement of her first coming was over, Elsie grew sad and languid. The young girl tried to rouse her by dwelling on the joy of Stephen's return, but she was alarmed by the effect this had on her friend's spirits. The thought seemed to give Elsie new life; it brought a glow to her cheeks, and light to her eyes, but Peggy saw *that this soon faded*, and she began to wonder whether *she ought to encourage what might prove, after all, a*

false hope. Elsie confessed to her that she was glad now that her home had been chosen near the sea. "It seems to bring me nearer him," she said.

They spent most of their time out-of-doors. Peggy saw that the air benefited Elsie, and she was very glad to avoid Mrs. Limber. Of Dick they saw little, and the girl often sighed at the remembrance of her former visit.

One day the friends met him just outside the gate.

"You look as if you want something to do," said Elsie. "Won't you take us the promised walk to Buckhurst Hill?—it is such a lovely morning, and the butterflies will be in their glory."

Dick thought she looked as bright as any butterfly as she stood smiling at him.

"Yes," he said, "I'm delighted to go with you, though we are a little too late and a little too early for the best wild flowers. May and August are the flower months for Buckhurst Hill." He looked at Peggy, but, as if she were a second thought, his chief object was evidently to please Elsie.

To Peggy, who knew her friend's inmost thoughts, this seemed absurd—more than that, it was uncourteous. The little maiden was not conceited, but she had seen Dick Limber look at her in a very different fashion when she first came to Hillside, and, as she was unconscious of having given any offence, she felt that she must either take her old place or quarrel with him.

Little by little she lagged behind, and, when they

reached the foot of the hill, she stooped to gather some of the pretty rosy blossoms that gemmed the grass underfoot. Elsie and Dick were some way ahead of her. Pixie, too, had left her to gambol on in front of the others.

"I 'll go home," she pouted ; "I 'll not be treated like a naughty child ; he has put me in the corner ever since I came. I won't stand it any longer."

"Dick," Elsie was saying, "let us wait, or Peggy will have to run to overtake us."

"Well, it won't hurt her if she does." He did not even look back over his shoulder.

"For shame !—how can you be so unkind ? Why, you always try to save me a run."

"You !—that's quite different." Dick spoke so earnestly that his cousin was surprised. "You are you—Miss Peggy is quite another person."

At this moment Peggy came up, her cheeks glowing and her hair ruffled over her eyes. She looked very attractive, and the effect on Dick was to make him feel crosser than ever. .

"You 'll be tired before we get to the top," he said, for she stood still and panted when she reached them.

Elsie began to climb the hill again, but Peggy waited while Dick spoke.

"How do you know I mean to go to the top ?" she said, defiantly.

"You need not go if you don't wish."

She made him a courtesy ; her color deepened.

"Thank you," she said, in a vexed voice, which she tried in vain to soften. "One has to ask your leave, then, before one decides. Do you farm the hill?"

Dick stared at her ; he saw she was vexed, but he could not tell what he had done to vex her.

"I only mean that I promised to take Elsie to the top for the view, so I can't go back with you now."

"Dear me, no—of course not ; but surely I did not ask you to go back with me, did I ? I was not thinking of such a thing." She gave him what she meant to be a look of calm indifference, but she could with difficulty keep back tears.

Dick was puzzled ; he had never seen Peggy like this.

"Are you offended with me ?" he said.

Peggy looked at him ; he did not seem sorry even—he appeared to be asking an indifferent question, without any anxiety about the answer that would be made to it.

"How can I be offended about nothing ?" she said. "I really don't understand you, Mr. Limber." But, as she darted a quick glance at him, he looked so utterly bewildered that she took courage ; for her heart had throbbed in a sort of wild terror when he asked if she was offended. She began to laugh. "I am afraid I was not thinking much about you. But we had best go after your cousin, or she will reach the top first."

Dick walked on silently. His heart reproached him for his neglect of the pretty little creature beside him,

who had really done nothing to offend him. He stole a look at her from time to time. Her head was held very erect, and a look of wounded pride was on her face. She looked wonderfully charming, but he remembered what his step-mother had said, and he hardened himself against her.

Elsie had walked on slowly, and they soon overtook her. They were now near the top of the hill.

"I quite agree with you, Peggy," she said ; "it is a very fine view from here."

Peggy looked round, and slightly tossed her head.

"It is extraordinary how one's ideas change," she said, with a little laugh. "To-day I do not think this is much of a view. I suppose one's ideas of people and places vary according to circumstances."

"I don't see that, do you, Elsie?" said Dick. "A fine view must always be a fine view ; and this is a fine view. I never heard another opinion of it."

Elsie was disappointed. She had devised this walk for the purpose of giving Peggy and Dick an opportunity of renewing their intimacy, and they seemed obstinately inclined to disagree.

"What has come to you two?" she said. "You seem to have agreed to differ. I shall not ask you to walk with us again, Dick, without an assurance that you will not be cross or contradictory."

Dick's handsome face clouded over with mortification. He looked at his cousin reproachfully.

"You must put up with me, Elsie," he said. "I can't help being cross when I'm vexed—and that's the truth."

"He's a noble fellow," thought Peggy, "and I'm a horrid, mean-minded girl."

She walked on in silence, looking at the sea. All at once she said :

"I often think how strange it must be to go on day after day without seeing a tree, or a hill, or a river, or a house, or even a fresh face, only the perpetual sea. No wonder sailors are glad to come home,"—then she sighed—"at least when they do come home."

Elsie's head drooped, and she walked on a little faster, so as to detach herself from her companions. Peggy looked penitently at Dick.

"I am so stupid," she said, in a low voice. "I ought not to have said that."

"Why not?" Dick said, roughly. He was very angry with Peggy for her ill-timed remark, but he affected unconsciousness.

"I meant," said Peggy, "it might remind her, you know, of my cousin's shipwreck."

"Oh!"—he held up his head defiantly—"she got over that very quickly. He was only a recent acquaintance, as you know."

Peggy longed to say she knew better, but this would have been a betrayal of her friend's confidence. Dick did not say another word to her. He had rarely felt so angry; he heartily wished she had never come to Hill-

side. When the three reached home, they looked much duller than when they started.

After this there seemed to be a tacit hostility between Dick and Peggy. Once Elsie remonstrated with her friend, but the girl said that Elsie fancied things.

"I get on very well with him." She laughed, but her friend saw that she looked sad.

Peggy found Mrs. Limber's eyes constantly fixed on her, and, when Dick was specially careless or inattentive, it seemed to the girl that his step-mother looked pleased. For worlds she would not have betrayed her mortification ; she chattered and laughed gayly with Mr. Limber, but more than once Elsie was sure she saw tears in her eyes.

Dick wished her visit was ended ; he could not understand his own feelings about her. When he came back from Buckhurst Hill, he said irritably to Mrs. Limber :

"You were right—that girl spends her time in talking to Elsie about Brent. Why can't she let the dead rest?"

"Poor little Peggy ! don't be hard on her, Dick. I'm not sure whether she really cares for you, but I'm sure she meant to be Mrs. Dick Limber ; she'll do all she can to part you and Elsie."

"She must know she has n't a chance beside Elsie," and then he checked himself. He felt it would be unmanly to say that he thought Peggy was not half as sweet and gentle as she was last year ; it never occurred to him that his own changed manner made Peggy unreal and

constrained toward him. Day by day he grew more enamored of his cousin's gentleness; for Elsie was gentler than ever in trying to smooth the discord which she felt was increasing, when Peggy spoke as pertly and sharply to Mrs. Limber as she did to Dick.

It was almost a relief to Elsie to hear that Mrs. Short had written asking her daughter to return a week sooner than she had arranged to do. But still she knew she should greatly miss Peggy, and she told her so.

"No, you won't"—tears started into Peggy's eyes, but she brushed them bravely away—"you 'll be happy enough soon; you can't be glad to have such a cross, quarrelsome wretch as I have been lately with you, you sweet, good thing."

Then, fearing questions, she hugged Elsie vehemently, and ran down into the house-place to say good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Limber.

"Peggy," her mother said, after watching her daughter's silent, abstracted manner the evening she reached home; "I'm afraid this has not been quite so happy a visit as the last was, though you had so much better weather."

Peggy got up; she kissed her mother and answered, with her pretty head hidden from those keen, kind eyes, which till now had known all her joys and sorrows,

"No, it was n't quite happy, little mother; but please don't ask questions—it was my own fault, all of it."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE CLIFF.

DICK LIMBER is lying on the turf below the flag-staff on the cliff. His eyes are half closed. To all appearance he has been basking in the warmth of this delicious day in late October, watching the lazy movements of fleecy clouds as they sail across the blue, for the rising wind drifts them, seemingly against their will, bit by bit from the huge range of snow mountains they had represented on the west an hour ago. But Dick has not been gazing at the sky. He is watching with intense interest his cousin's slender figure as she paces the edge of the cliff ; just now she bends so far over it, as she gazes out over the sea, that Dick feels giddy.

"I say, Elsie," he calls out, "how much longer are you going to stand there?"

He speaks gently, lest he should startle her ; then, after waiting a minute, he mutters : "She won't answer," and he gets up and goes toward her.

Dick is little changed outwardly, since last year, he is still a fine, handsome fellow, a good specimen of an English yeoman, tall and broad-chested ; but his forehead shows lines that were not there last year, and his blue eyes have still more of the angular expression that always marred them ; there is less of the serene, bovine look in them—more feeling, and perhaps more craft. He holds himself better, and certainly looks older than he did. He

is a fine fellow, and deserves the credit he has in the county as the best batsman, and one of the best riders to hounds to be met with.

People, who know nothing about Elsie's love story, wonder that she should pay so little heed to her handsome cousin's wooing.

He is close beside her now, but she looks so unconscious of his approach that he still fears to startle her. He gently takes firm hold of her arm.

Elsie turns round at once. She does not look startled, only annoyed.

"I came up here for a little peace," she says, haughtily, "a little freedom, Dick." Then, after a pause, "Oh! don't follow me about like a dog, or I shall hate you."

The last words are intensely earnest; Dick is used to these moods, and he thinks it best to seem dull to-day.

"I don't follow you everywhere, Elsie; but I must watch over you here. It's not safe to stand on that crumbling edge; besides, it serves no purpose. I suppose you only want to gaze out over the sea, and you can see that just as well a few feet inland." Then he adds, in a sullen, defiant tone, "Of course it's distance you are spying after all day."

Till now she had not turned her head, she had spoken over her shoulder; but now she suddenly faced him.

She had changed far more than Dick Limber had. Elsie looked as if her nights were spent in weeping. But now there was a pathetic entreaty in her eyes as she fixed *them on her cousin.*

"Richard, why do you speak to me in that cruel way? I am not willingly unkind to you, and you know it. Can't you, or won't you, see that I come here for a little rest and peace?" She looked toward the farm-house nestling on the side of the far-off hill, and hidden just now by the dull green of the trees around it. "I wonder why I don't go back to Wortham?" she said.

The pathetic tones, the appeal in her eyes touched him; he loved her dearly, though he was so jealous of this clinging to a dead man's memory.

"I beg your pardon," he said, humbly; "I was a fool and a brute to speak like that to you—you know what it is that gets the better or the worst of me." She gave him a forgiving look, and at this he went on, passionately—"Oh, Elsie, my darling, don't be angry with me, but, if you could give up this hope of seeing Stephen again, you'd be ever so much happier; God knows I don't say it from selfishness. Everybody says you are so changed; Mr. Roberts said to me on Sunday, he was so struck with the change he saw in you." But Elsie's face had hardened as he went on, and hope died out of his voice. "I speak chiefly for you—you can't think how pale and altered you look. You'll be ill, I know you will, Elsie dear; just try to think of others a little; whatever will become of me if you are really ill?"

"But, Dick, be reasonable,"—the gentle look came back to her face; "you seem to expect me to take your advice, and yet you will not listen when I advise you."

"Yes, I will ; I promise you I'll do whatever you like, if you'll only be a good girl, and put this vain idea out of your head. It was n't as if it had been only in one paper ; there it was in every one I saw, or that anybody else saw. It's not reasonable to go on persisting as you do, Elsie—you are only killing yourself by inches."

The girl looked very grave, but the old sweet look had come back to her face, and she spoke very gently.

"I am not going on persisting forever—oh, no, Dick—that would be wicked. No, I will not do that ; I mean to go on hoping and expecting till Christmas ; I can't look beyond that, or make any promise." This was in answer to the eager question in his eyes. "Perhaps I may n't be here—who can say what may happen before Christmas ?"

"Elsie," he said, earnestly, "when you first came here, had you ever cared for any one ?"

"No."

"Then, if I had not been such a dull idiot, I might have made you love me ; but, Elsie, even in those days I loved you more than I knew. I grew restless and discontented directly you went away."

The plaintive softness faded out of her face ; she smiled cheerfully at her cousin.

"Come, come, Dick, you have been listening to Mrs. Limber, I know ; she always makes mischief between us, *though perhaps she does not mean to do it : be a man, and act for yourself.* Listen, I'll tell you what to do.

Go to Wortham—there 's a dear little girl there, much more worth your thinking about than I am. Oh ! Dick, Peggy Short is worth fifty of me, and she would make such a fond, good little wife—I know she would—and she 's far prettier than I am.”

Dick's eyes blazed with the anger he had been struggling against.

“Peggy Short be hanged ! What right have you to suppose I want a fond wife like that—a fond idiot—a girl who would say ‘Yes’ to-morrow if I asked her to have me ! No, thank you, Elsie ; when I take a wife, she shall be harder to win than your Peggy Short would be.”

“Stop, stop, Dick ; I can't have you speak against my friend”—Elsie was angry now—“and you are going much too fast. I never said Miss Short loved you—I mean that she loves no one else ; so that, if you were to try to win her love, you would not be robbing any one. If I were a man, Dick, I would have a love of my own ; she should not belong to somebody else.”

Before he could stop her, she had sprung past him, and hurried along the white road which wound its way across the grassy downs to Hillside.

Elsie was not in a mood to face Mrs. Limber, and, instead of going in through the arch in the yew hedge, she went round till she reached the large black gates by which the farm-yard was entered.

But just as she reached the white gate the door of the

house-place opened, and Mrs. Limber came out and stood on the square flagstone in front of the door. She did not see Elsie at first, and she shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked across the downs toward Blackwater. The girl thought how utterly unmatched the farmer's wife was to her surroundings, there was no trace of country life on her dark, regular face or in the simple style of her dark cloth gown.

All at once Mrs. Limber saw Elsie coming toward her, and her lips twitched eagerly.

"Where is Dick? Have n't you seen him?"

"He is down at the flag-staff." Elsie tried to speak as coldly as possible.

"Oh, dear, how tiresome, and I want him directly! What shall I do? It would be so kind of you if you would go and fetch him; it would not take you long." But the coaxing tone was lost on Elsie; she had passed on into the kitchen.

She was unutterably weary, and she longed to sit down in the window-seat and rest; but there was no safety there, Mrs. Limber might come in and talk with her, or Dick himself might come, and Elsie began to feel a dread lest in her weak state she might be some day drawn into promising what she could not ratify, just to escape persecution; so she went up the broad staircase to her bedroom at the end of the long, panelled gallery.

She sat down in one of the old black chairs. That dim feeling, which had come to her on the night of

Stephen's departure, that Hillside was a prison, and that Mrs. Limber was her jailer, had lately returned, and now kept constant possession of her.

The very striving with which she kept back all signs of outward sorrow had helped to make her thin, and worn, and weak.

"Why do I not go back to Wortham?" she thought. "If I cannot live in Uncle Edward's house, I could be with Mrs. Short. Why don't I go?"

She could not define it to herself, but she felt the irresistible attraction of the sea; she had parted from Stephen beside it—in her last letter she had told him he would find her waiting for him at Hillside. A sort of fascination that she could not resist kept her there, and day by day she stayed longer and longer on the verge of the cliff, near the flag-staff, watching and waiting for her lover. Of late, too, she shrank more than ever from staying in-doors. A fresh misery had come to her, a doubt of Mrs. Limber's good faith. She could not have told when the suspicion dawned upon her, for, although she no longer petted and caressed her, Mrs. Limber was not unkind. But Elsie had grown to wonder whether, if Stephen came to the farm in her absence, he would be fairly dealt by in respect to her; and whether, if he wrote to her, she should receive his letter.

Over and over again she had pondered these questions. Peggy Short was always urging her to come to Wortham. Elsie felt that, in a brighter, happier atmosphere, peace •

might come to aid the hope in her weary heart, but she could not resolve to trust Mrs. Limber, and in this doubt she could not leave Hillside.

"She is so anxious that I should marry Dick, that I have sometimes thought she hopes the news is true," the pale, heavy-eyed girl said to herself. "It is better to bear her persecution than to run any risk."

CHAPTER IX.

"ROBIN ADAIR."

WHEN Elsie came down from her gloomy bedroom, she found Dick and his step-mother talking in the house-place. They started when they saw her coming from the staircase, but before she reached them Dick sauntered away.

Mrs. Limber followed him to the door, and stood watching while he crossed the muddy chicken-yard.

"Poor fellow!" she sighed, as she came back to Elsie. "I never saw a young fellow so altered, so heart-broken. You have much to answer for, Elsie Neale."

There was a threatening tone in her voice that Elsie had not heard before. It seemed to justify the doubts and fears she had been indulging. She looked up very gravely at Mrs. Limber.

"*You have much to answer for,*" she said. "*If you left Dick alone, he would give this persecution of me up.*"

He never thought of me of his own accord. But for you, I believe he would marry Peggy."

"Peggy indeed! Why, the poor fellow worships you! Peggy is a silly goose, but I wish her a better fate than to marry a man who does not care for her."

"He did not care for me when he was at Wortham," Elsie said, slowly; "he liked Peggy much better." She had shrunk all her life from open discussion; now it seemed forced on her. "Why do you persist in giving him false hopes about me?"

Mrs. Limber saw that she had gone too far, and she regretted this; for she had determined not to quarrel with Elsie.

"I give Dick no false hopes," she said, gently. "I only tell him that which I know to be possible. But I am surprised at you."

She paused, and she saw that Elsie was looking inquiringly at her.

"I have always considered you a good, religious sort of girl," she went on, "and I ask you whether you think it right to persist in disbelieving what every one else believes—in fact, what we all know to be true. You are going against Providence, dear."

She shook her head warningly.

A wan smile came on the girl's face.

"I hope I am not wicked in this," she said, earnestly.

"I try not to set my will against God's," Mrs. Limber sneered. "I do not mean to go on expecting all my life

—but I think, before very long, there will be news——”

She paused. Mrs. Limber was looking at her with such intense curiosity that Elsie shrank from finishing her sentence.

“But, after all,” she thought, “Dick will be sure to tell her.” So she went on speaking. “If we have no news by the end of the year, then I give up hope.”

And at the thought the light faded out of her sunken blue eyes, and her hands fell listlessly beside her, but the effect of her words on Mrs. Limber was magical.

She put her arm round her, and kissed her.

“You sweet, noble creature!” she said. “I can’t tell you the good you have done me; you have restored my faith in human nature by being so true to yourself.”

Elsie did not listen. She drew herself away; her heart seemed dried up, emptied of all power of human love.

Mrs. Limber walked to the window; she saw that the subject had been carried quite far enough, and that time for reaction must be given to Elsie.

She did not know how much misery she inflicted by her efforts for her step-son, because she was too self-centred for the real insight into Elsie’s nature which would have taught her this; she judged others by her own feelings, and by the mere acuteness of a shallow perception. It would have been impossible to Mrs. Limber to divine *that Elsie’s heart suffered for the pain she read in her cousin’s face*, that even now she had grieved not to re-

turn Mrs. Limber's caresses ; and, even if Mrs. Limber had divined this, it would have been impossible for her to guess at the single-minded truth and uprightness which made it impossible to Elsie to simulate any thing she did not feel.

Mrs. Limber stood at the window trying to find an outside subject in which she could interest her guest.

All at once she turned round, with a bright smile on her dark face

"Will you come and play an accompaniment for me, dear ? I used to sing tolerably, but I am so out of practice that I dare not utter a note till I've trained my voice a little. Will you ? It will be so very kind."

"I fear I don't accompany well," Elsie said ; "but I will do the best I can."

The piano-forte stood in the least used of the two parlors—Mrs. Limber's drawing-room—it had not been often used, and the keys were stiff and the tone muffled.

Mrs. Limber sang a song, and then went through some scales and exercises, while Elsie sat down and looked through a folio of songs. She was surprised by the quality of Mrs. Limber's voice ; she had always refused to sing when asked to do so, though Elsie fancied that she sang when she thought herself unheard. The girl had expected a fine voice, but one rather hard and metallic ; she was surprised by the sympathetic feeling she heard in the full, clear tones.

Presently Mrs. Limber got up, and came and looked over her shoulder.

"Ah! that used to be a famous song of mine, but I won't sing it now," she said.

Her very voice had changed. Elsie thought it sounded so much less artificial and coaxing. The song was "Robin Adair."

"Oh, yes, please sing it!" the girl said, hardly realizing what she was asking for.

Mrs. Limber looked unwilling, but she took the song from Elsie and began the symphony.

Presently the voice came so sweet and plaintive in its question that Elsie listened in surprise; but, as the song went on, the singer's pathos deepened, till at last the mournful wail sounded like the cry of a heart stirred to its most hidden depths of tenderness.

Mrs. Limber had become so absorbed in her singing that she had forgotten Elsie's presence. Now, turning to replace the song, she saw that the girl's face was hidden in her clasped hands, and that tears were streaming through her thin fingers.

Mrs. Limber turned sharply away; all her jealousy and the growing hatred she felt when she thought of Stephen Brent, or when the dread of losing Elsie's fortune presented itself, rose up against her pity.

If she showed sympathy with Elsie now, how could she persist in pleading Dick's cause? Besides, Stephen had been dead more than a year—she had got over her sorrow; why should she encourage Elsie to give way? She bent down and turned over some loose music which she had

scattered on a table ; she took up a wild, stirring fantasia of Brahms. It was wonderful how little she had lost of her skilful and brilliant execution, though her playing gave less pleasure than her singing had done, it was so much more mechanical ; but the restless music had the effect she expected ; it broke suddenly into Elsie's sorrowful vision of the past, scattered memories and future imaginings as a wind gust scatters autumn petals, and literally set the girl's nerves jarring with the sudden rebound.

"Thank you," she said. "I must go now and write some letters. You ought not to neglect your voice ; it is beautiful."

But she did not offer to accompany another song ; she felt as if each time she listened to Mrs. Limber the sharp, keen anguish evoked by the song she had heard to-day would return. She was glad to go to the parlor and write to Peggy. She could tell her all that happened in her dull life, except indeed the persecution of Dick's love. Her own conviction was strong that, without his clever step-mother to thwart the feeling, Dick would have cared more for Peggy than for herself, and Elsie's absence of vanity made the step-mother's motive clear.

Elsie sighed ; she wished she could give half her money to Peggy, but she knew that her uncle's will had debarred her from any such liberal intentions, it being settled on her children, *and in case of her death without any, would be divided between Dick and the hospitals of Wortham, which were in a sadly impoverished state.*

Even without this, Elsie doubted whether Mrs. Short would have permitted Peggy to accept her liberality, for already, in one short visit she had made to Wortham, she had found it difficult to give her friend as many presents as she wished, lest she should wound the girl's mother.

CHAPTER X.

MR. LIMBER "PUTS HIS FOOT DOWN."

MRS. LIMBER'S early contact with the world had given her a great advantage over other women; except in seeming she was never impulsive, though occasionally she found it useful to speak as if impelled by a momentary feeling. Elsie's admission that she meant to give up the hope of seeing Stephen at the end of the year had filled her with a wild joy which she at once calmed down, seeming only intent on soothing and amusing the girl; yet while she sang "Robin Adair," she was angry with herself, for she knew that the pathos which she could not keep out of her voice must stir Elsie keenly.

Now, as soon as the girl left her, she shut the piano-forte, replaced the scattered music, and stood for a moment smiling in triumph.

Though she disliked the house-place, she went back to it now—she wanted to see Dick alone. She would not say a word to her husband, she thought. Lately he had taken a habit of standing by Elsie in all things, and this had increased his wife's bitterness against the girl.

As she stood thinking over this before the vast fireplace, she frowned.

"If I could be sure Dick would n't give her up, I'd let her go," she said—"she's in my way here; but it must be made safe with Dick before we lose sight of her. I will trust nothing to chance."

Certainly, she thought, she was a hardly-used woman. Dick was always cross; Elsie was either sad or silent; sulky, Mrs. Limber said, and her husband, although he had not actually blamed, had been silent when he should have spoken, and had given sheepish, deprecating looks when she had blamed his niece. More than once he had said, very tenderly, that it was a hard trial to be laid on such a young, loving creature.

Mrs. Limber started when the door opened. Dick came lounging in from the yard.

"Can't find the governor; have you seen him? I say, you'd best leave Elsie alone; she's on the high stilts to-day and no mistake."

Mrs. Limber looked at him, and then she laughed.

"See how differently men and women judge, Dick. I should have said she's nearer yielding than she's ever been."

"What do you mean by yielding?" he said, roughly.

"What can I mean but listening to you? She told me just now there would be a chance for you after Christmas."

"*Did she say that?*" Dick's face glowed, and he

looked eagerly into his step-mother's face. "Did she say those very words? Are you sure, Mrs. Limber? By Jove! I don't deserve it," he added, half to himself.

"She said that when the New Year came she should give up thinking about Mr. Brent."

Dick's face clouded, and the eager hope faded from his eyes.

"Is that all? How you women do twist and turn things!" he said, sulkily. "Why, she has said as much as that to me; but it don't amount to much, after all. I can't see that it holds out hope for me."

Mrs. Limber laughed out, but Dick saw how scornful she was.

"How can you be so absurd? Have you not often said to me that a woman is twice as quick as a man is, and you know that I am clever. Now listen: her having told it to you is proof positive of what she means; if she had only said it to me it would be different." In her heart Mrs. Limber knew that this was not true, but she was bound to give him encouragement to keep him in hope. "Now, look here, Dick, you leave her alone, take less notice of her; if I were you, I would not so much as ask her to take a walk till New Year's Day. She's so tiresome and contradictory that this will help to bring her round."

For it seemed to her that Elsie must be strangely unnerved to give way as she had done to-day, and that, unless she had time to calm in, she might take some des-

perate step which would effectually separate her from Dick.

"It's a long time to New Year's Day," he said, unwillingly.

"Not much more than three months ; be kind to Elsie, of course, but if you are wise let her be till the time comes. When this fancy is over she'll come to her senses again ; she is as good as crazy now, and she must be humored. But, Dick, don't tell your father I said Elsie was crazy ; he grows besotted about her."

Dick looked up sharply.

"He's very fond of her, poor girl ! And who is n't ? I believe he has more real feeling than any one else has for Elsie."

"Hush !"

But Mrs. Limber spoke too late. The door had opened quietly, and Mr. Limber stood looking from his wife to his son ; they both wondered how much he had heard.

"What's this about Elsie?" he said. "I'll not have the girl teased. She shall do just as she pleases."

He shut his lips together with a look of determination new to Mrs. Limber, and, stuffing both hands into his pockets, he stood with his back to the hearth.

"You're right, father," Dick said. "She shall do just as she pleases, as far as I am concerned ;" and he walked out of the house-place.

"Coward !" his step-mother muttered ; and even her lips grew white with anger,

"Now look you here, Harrie;" the farmer had seen that his wife and son were startled by his sudden appearance; slow-witted as he was, he had, for some time, suspected that pressure was being put on Elsie. "Look you here," he repeated, so steadily and coldly that his wife was confounded. "I won't have this go on; I'd like to have Elsie for a daughter more than words can say—but she must not be worried about marrying Dick. She shall do as she likes."

"One would think Dick was a monster, the way you talk of him," said Mrs. Limber, with a toss of her head.

It was an unfortunate movement. When Harriet Limber tossed her head she stuck out her chin and looked almost plain; there was something now in her expression that ruffled her husband.

"If she don't like Dick, she can't be forced into it," he said, firmly. "Now understand, Harrie, once for all, I *will* not have the girl worried."

"I will not." He had never before used such an expression to his wife. She shrugged her shoulders, raised her delicate eyebrows, and mentally added another notch to her account against Elsie.

Then all at once her head drooped, and she put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"It's all for poor dear Dick's sake," she whimpered. In her husband's present mood she saw that open resistance was useless; she had no intention of letting him know how much she disliked his niece.

He was touched, and he patted her shoulder, with a kindly smile on his good-natured face.

"Yes, yes, I know, my pet. You are a first-rate step-mother, Harrie ; but you must think of the girl too."

She pulled her handkerchief away, her eyes were full of reproach.

"I hope I am just, Richard, but I never set up for being a Spartan ; Dick 's like my own flesh and blood, and I must take his part. Besides, I mean only good to Elsie. I can't fancy a kinder husband than Dick will make—he is so like you !"

She did not look at her husband, but she pinched his arm, and gave a little smile.

The farmer was delighted ; his wife was very chary of any demonstration of affection. He took her face between his huge hands, and gave her a sounding kiss.

"You 're a duck," he said. "And you 're good, as well as clever. Many a girl would n't have cared to have a six-foot high son always dawdling about the place, but you 've made a friend of Dick, Harrie, and you 've given him good advice ; you 've made a different fellow of him. He was often at the ' Flitch of Bacon ' before you came, wasting his time, and now he tells me he don't care to go there."

"I 'm so glad, dear." But Mrs. Limber thought this interview had lasted long enough, and she moved away from her husband.

"Stay a bit," he said. "I have to wait till Sam comes

back from the parsonage. I sent to ask Mr. Roberts if he'd like one of Fan's pups. Come and sit ye down a bit."

In spite of her soft words, she was not in a sweet humor.

"You are always doing something for those Robertses," she said, "and they do nothing for you."

"They 're very civil to Elsie," he said.

She did not answer. She had never told her husband of the petty slights inflicted on her. She felt that she could revenge them so much better than he could, and her creed was that to complain of a humiliation was to lower yourself in the opinion of the person to whom you complained; the least said the soonest mended. Even her husband might have said it was partly her own fault. She knew that she was faultless in his eyes; it was much better than he should imagine all the world agreed with him.

"I say, Harrie, what were you and Dick saying about Elsie?" he asked, when they were both seated in the window.

She hesitated. Perhaps, after all, it might be better to repeat what his niece had said.

"Why, dear, I was just telling Dick I thought Elsie was coming round."

"How was that? I was only thinking this morning that she ought to see a doctor; she looks so sadly ill."

"She tires herself so; she is on her legs nearly all day."

"Ah!"—the farmer blew his nose sonorously in a huge red and buff silk handkerchief—"she's much to be pitied. Young Brent was an uncommon fine young chap; I don't know that I've ever seen one that was quite Brent's equal. You liked what you saw of him, didn't you, Harrie?"

He was looking full at her, and she dared not let her eyelids droop; she forced her eyes into a fixed, hard stare.

"Oh, yes, I liked him well enough. But look here, Richard; suppose, being a sailor, he was just a little changeable, and suppose when he came home he had n't cared for Elsie—don't you think it's better for her to think of him as dead than as caring for somebody else?"

The farmer laughed and patted her shoulder.

"That's what you call logic, hey? but it's beyond me," he said. "I only look at facts. She's a sort of widow, poor soul, and, if ever I saw true love in a man's face, I saw it in his, though I remember at the time you tried to throw dust in my eyes, and made out there was only a flirtation. But what makes you say there's more chance for Dick now?" he said, abruptly.

"Because Elsie is thinking less of—of the other one; she told me just now that, if no news came by the close of the year, she should give up expecting him to return.

"Did she, now? H'm!" Mr. Limber looked surprised, even disappointed, his wife thought.

"Oh, yes ! and she told Dick the same. It's always so, you know, these desperate attachments never last. My opinion is that, long before this time next year, Elsie will be Dick's wife."

Mr. Limber got up ; he saw Sam coming across the yard.

"Well, if it 's to be, it will be for the best, no doubt," he said. "All I say is, let it come as it will, don't you do any thing, my pet, to urge it forward, or to put any distress or worry on the girl, she has as much as she can bear, poor thing. It 's the last straw, you know."

Mrs. Limber watched him walk away with Sam, and a look of contempt curved her lips.

"I am certainly not selfish in trying to bring about the marriage," she thought. "It seems to me I shall scarcely be first with any one when Elsie is Dick's wife. . . . If she would only die, how much better it would be for everybody."

CHAPTER XI.

A DREAM.

AT Wortham all hours had been alike to Elsie ; she had never realized till she lost it the supremacy of power she possessed there. Her uncle Edward had *liked her to be engrossed with him*, and Mrs. Castles had *been apt to tyrannize* ; but Elsie had always felt un-

fettered about the employment of her time, and when she chose to sit and think, no one had ever disturbed her meditations.

At Hillside—which to all outward seeming was an old-fashioned, leisureful farm-house, where life might be supposed to be almost idyllic in simplicity and repose—there was to Elsie an atmosphere of unrest. She fancied that Mrs. Limber resented her intimacy with Mrs. Collingwood ; and, since the fatal news came, she had refused all invitations to the Hall ; but her friend sometimes came to see her.

Still even to Mrs. Collingwood Elsie had not given full confidence, so that except in her letters to Peggy Short she had had no relief in these weary months from the solitude in which she lived. Only at night, when she was shut up in her own room and all the rest of the household were in bed, did she feel free to indulge in a long reverie.

To-night, as she sat with her fair hair spread over her shoulders, she was asking herself what could have moved her to speak as she had spoken to Dick.

It had been unwise in every way—it had drawn attention to herself, and it had certainly given both her cousin and Mrs. Limber a false hope. At the time the words had come to her, and she had felt she must speak them. While she spoke, it had seemed to her so sure that *Stephen would return*, but before she reached the farm *this conviction had faded*, and when she forced herself

to repeat her resolve to Mrs. Limber, her hopes had grown faint and improbable. Stephen had not been the only officer on board the *Europa*; several others had perished in the ill-fated ship, and, so far as she had heard, all their relations had accepted their trial, and resigned themselves to the loss of their loved ones.

"Unresigned," the girl sat with head bent over her clasped hands. "No, I do not murmur against God's will, but something tells me, even in my sleep, that Stephen is still alive."

She thought finally that perhaps it had been better to say what she had said to Mrs. Limber.

After such a promise, it was possible she would leave her in peace; if she did not, then Elsie thought she would go to Mrs. Collingwood for a few days to escape this wearying life.

She was so very weary to-night that she was glad to lie down and rest in the huge bedstead, with its four carved mahogany pillows and deep red hangings. Usually she lay awake for some time after she was in bed, but to-night, as soon almost as her head touched the pillow, she felt drowsy; still she lay debating with herself; she could not yield up her hope of Stephen's return. She had drawn up her window-blinds, as she always did to get a last glimpse of the sea before she went to sleep; the sea seemed to be the connecting link between her and her lover. To-night the moon was so clear and high that it made a long silver path, which seemed to come straight

across the sea to the flag-staff, and then across the downs to the farm-house.

Elsie's drowsiness left her as she lay gazing at the moonlight. It made the way across the sea seem so straight and easy, she felt as if it would lead her to Stephen. . . . Her room grew lighter, and by degrees every object in it was distinctly revealed. She began to think she should not go to sleep at all. . . .

All at once she wakened with a start. . . . She had been asleep then ; the room was full of light, and there was something cold clasping her left wrist. She looked at it, and saw that it was bound by a silver cord. She raised herself on her elbow to see more distinctly, and the cord had grown broader. As she looked it broadened still more, and drew her very gently from the bed. . . . She seemed to move quite easily, and yet without any will in the movement. When she had risen, the broad silver cord lay at her feet, a long, shining path, the window had disappeared, and without any effort she found herself following this path and standing below the flag-staff, when there had seemed scarcely time to traverse the garden of the farm-house. She stood still beneath the flag-staff. No voice had spoken to her, but she knew that she was waiting for some one.

It was darker here than it had been in her bedroom, but the broad silver track shone brighter than ever ; it went over the edge of the cliff and away out to sea. . . . *Elsie held her breath in rapt expectation. Should she be*

drawn along the path which looked so firm and white across the sea? . . . All at once, while she stood gazing, the line of rippling silver quivered; there came along it a faint mist, this darkened into a shadow as it drew nearer, and then, as it reached the edge of the cliff, it took the form of Stephen. Elsie cried out, and pressed forward to reach him, but he pointed to the rocks below the cliff, and made her a sign with his hand. She listened, for he had turned his head, as if he heard some sound. . . . Indistinct at first, but swelling cheerily through the chill air, came the far-off notes of church-bells ringing the joyous peal that heralds "peace on earth, good-will toward men," the peal that ushers in the birthday of the Lord. Elsie's heart was thrilled as she listened to the joy-bells. . . . She looked up. . . . The moon had sunk much lower, and now the stars were shining overhead as if they too rang joy-bells in the clear, cold air. . . .

She looked toward Stephen. He was not there, and yet his absence did not grieve her. . . . Again the joyful Christmas bells clashed out, and mingled with them through the air she heard her lover's voice.

BOOK SIXTH.

CHAPTER I.

AT MRS. SHORT'S.

IT only wanted a fortnight to Christmas. The weather was clear and cold, but it was crisp and exhilarating, with no bitterness of north or east wind to make one shrink from coming snow and shiver under the warmest wrappings.

Elsie and Peggy Short were walking quickly up and down the long, narrow strip of garden at the back of Mrs. Short's little house in Wortham. There was nothing to distract their thoughts from one another. There was only one indication that Nature had passed through her darkest and dreariest time of year, and that was in the flowers of a yellow jasmine, without leaves, that clustered round the glass door leading into the garden.

All at once there comes a peal of clear, rippling laughter from the two figures on the gravel-path. Elsie is standing still in the middle of the walk, and her face *looks very much brighter and younger than it did at Hillside.*

Peggy puts her arm round her friend, and kisses her.

"I wish we could have you here always," she says; "for now I see it is not a selfish wish. You look so much better than when you came. Must you really go back for Christmas?"

"I am afraid I must, dear;" but Elsie does not look sad as she speaks. There is instead a gladness in her eyes which at once puzzles and depresses Peggy.

"She cares for Dick, after all," she thinks, with a little sigh, "only she won't tell me because she thinks I care for him, and she knows he likes her best."

"Of course it is only too kind of you to come to us at all," poor Peggy says, humbly. "It must be dull enough here for you——"

Elsie pinches the hand that still clings to her waist.

"You are a naughty little story-teller, Peggy. I am not nearly amiable enough to have stayed here all these weeks unless I liked it. Now, Peggy, look me in the face, and tell me what you imagine to be the great attraction at Hillside for me?"

Peggy hesitates. She shrinks now from speaking of Dick Limber. Her rosy cheeks have a way of flaming up in a most absurd manner when she hears his name, and she does not want to betray herself to his cousin.

"Well," she says, "there are the sea and the fresh breezes, and then there's the large comfortable house. *You must find every thing so small and meagre here. Oh,*

Elsie, I think it must be lovely to live at Hillside!" And then Peggy looks into the wall nearest her; for she feels as if her face were crimson.

"There is no one to talk to there," says Elsie; "I mean in the way I talk to you. The squire's wife is very nice, only she is rather eccentric, and Uncle Limber is a dear old thing, but I seem to get less and less intimate with Mrs. Limber—our ideas are so different."

"Yes, they must be. I often wonder why I was so fond of her at school. Mamma never liked her, nor did dear Stephen—" And here Peggy checks herself.

She had never before alluded to the meeting between her cousin and Mrs. Limber at Barford.

But Elsie has noticed her words.

"Had they met, then, before he came to Hillside?"

"Yes, when we lived in the dear old home I have told you about; but papa died soon after, and then we had to leave."

"I wonder she never told me this." Then Elsie remembers that she has never given Mrs. Limber much chance after that first confidence; for in pursuance of her resolution to keep the matter completely secret until Mr. Martin knew of it, she always avoided any mention of Stephen to any one.

Meantime Peggy Short is pondering a remembrance. She cherishes the belief that Miss Harriet Gray cared for her cousin Stephen, and, grief-stricken though she herself *was at the time, she has never forgotten the look on the*

two faces in the parlor at St. John's Wood, when she came down to tell Stephen she was ready. She has often been on the point of telling her suspicion to Elsie, but while Stephen lived it seemed cruel to Mrs. Limber, and, after all, it is only gossip to say such a thing about a woman, Peggy thinks. But dislike grows rapidly, and ever since her last visit at Hillside Peggy has heartily disliked Mrs. Limber, and has resolved she will never again be her guest.

She and Elsie always seem by mutual consent to avoid the subject of Mrs. Limber, but to-day Peggy's tongue is unruly.

"Since I have seen you together," she says, "I have wondered how you get on at all; she is so unlike you in every way; she strikes me as being quite insincere."

It gives Elsie a shock to hear her secret misgivings put into words. While she has been living in this loving, genial atmosphere with Peggy and her mother, she has called herself morbid for her suspicions of her uncle's wife.

"Have you any special reason for thinking so?" she says, slowly.

Peggy's cheeks flame up again; she is glad of the shade her garden bonnet flings over her face.

"I feel wicked about her—I know it's wrong to set one person against another, and yet—do you think she likes you, Elsie?"

Elsie looks troubled.

"No ; and yet she likes me to be at Hillside. She tried to prevent me from coming here, and each letter I get from her urges me to go back. Really, Peggy, I cannot think she is altogether false."

Peggy's blue eyes look incredulous, and she shakes her head ; but she does not answer. In her heart she believes that Mrs. Limber hates Elsie, and her quick wits supply a cause for this dislike ; she does not imagine that her former friend had gone on loving Stephen when once she found he did not care about her, but she is sure that Mrs. Limber resents and is jealous of the attachment between him and Elsie. "It shows how spiteful she is that she can't forget it even now," she thinks—aloud she says, "I think she has set her heart on marrying you to your cousin, and I suppose she fears some one else may want to marry you if you leave Hillside."

Elsie smiles.

"There is no use in her thinking of such a marriage. It could never be. Even without all the past to come between we are quite unsuited. Dick wants some one much livelier than I am ; but, look, your mother is calling us."

Mrs. Short, much wrapped in a white woollen shawl, is standing at the glass door beckoning.

"You will both catch cold," she says, looking from one rosy face to the other. "Peggy, my dear, the tip of your nose is quite red, and, Miss Neale,"—she never calls Elsie by her Christian name—"Mr. Gordon is here."

Elsie smiles. She thinks Mr. Gordon comes to see Peggy, not her ; but she follows Mrs. Short into the room.

Mr. Gordon had been away for some time, and this was the first time he and Elsie had met since he came to Hillside ; for he had avoided her when he learned her engagement to Stephen Brent.

Mrs. Short felt very cheerful ; it seemed to her that this rising young fellow, who had jumped so unexpectedly into the best practice in Wortham, would make a very suitable husband for her girl, and she was glad to see Peggy doing her best to entertain him ; for Peggy, in the delight caused by her friend's society, was even livelier than ever. Mr. Gordon did not stay long ; he had called, he said, chiefly to ask if he might escort the ladies to see the fireworks which were to be let off next week in the public gardens.

"Do you hear that, Elsie ?" Peggy said to her friend. "We don't often have such doings at Wortham ; surely you will stay to see the fireworks ?"

Elsie laughed. "I wish I could ; but indeed I must go back to Hillside this week, and you will write me an account of all the grand doings."

"Oh !"—Peggy looked doubtful—"but I think the invitation is chiefly for you ; is it not, Mr. Gordon ?"

Mr. Gordon smiled politely, but he did not seem troubled by Elsie's refusal.

"I am very sorry indeed that Miss Neale cannot be

with you, but I hope"—he looked at Mrs. Short—"that you and your daughter will allow me to take care of you. It will be such an unusual event in our quiet town that there may be a little crowding."

Peggy thought that her mother was unusually gracious, and she teased her about her "civilities" when Mr. Gordon had departed.

• Elsie was amused; she divined the mother's wish, and she thought that Mr. Gordon was attracted by Peggy, but in her heart she felt sure that he had lost his chance of winning her bright little friend.

CHAPTER II.

ELSIE TELLS HER DREAM.

MEANTIME, Elsie was so much missed at Hill-side by the farmer and his son that Mrs. Limber's jealousy increased. It was not pleasant to look into the future and see herself superseded by a younger—another woman. There were not so many years between them, and Harriet knew that she was the handsomer of the two; but Elsie, as Dick's wife, would be able to take a much better position than she could ever hope to do as the wife of his father.

"Mr. Limber has no ambition," she said. "He will never listen to any suggestion that he considers 'uppish.' I believe he thinks generation after generation should *remain in the same position.*"

And yet she could not give up the advantages which Elsie's fortune offered, or the longing to see her safely married to Dick.

If Dick has been slow in learning to love his cousin, he now made up amply for such slowness. He was so cross and dissatisfied with his surroundings that when Elsie wrote to Mrs. Limber, announcing her return, his step-mother told Dick he had best go and fetch her.

He looked delighted, but then he hesitated.

"Won't it vex her?" he said. "You know, we have got on much better since I gave up courting her."

"I don't want you to court her." His step-mother always grew contemptuous when Dick showed any shrinking. "But I am always telling you, and yet you don't believe, that I understand girls better than you do. They are made up of vanity, even the very best, and any act of devotion wins them. Yes, Dick, you go to Wortham on Friday; and I shall expect to see you and Elsie come home quite a pair of lovers on Saturday—'absence makes the heart grow fonder,' remember."

Dick growled, "I should think I ought to know that by this time," but he took his step-mother's advice; and on Friday evening, when the three ladies were chatting over their needle-work in Mrs. Short's parlor, Mr. Dick Limber was announced.

Peggy blushingly gave him her seat next to Elsie. She saw that Dick was conscious and ill at ease, but Elsie seemed quite undisturbed by his arrival. She asked

Dick what had brought him to Wortham ; he hesitated in his answer.

"Well, you know, trains and platforms too are overcrowded so near Christmas, and luggage goes astray, and what not ; and we thought it would be more comfortable for you not to travel alone."

He saw Elsie's lip curl. That unlucky "we" had slipped out in sheer nervousness. Mrs. Limber had impressed on him that he must make it appear that he was doing this of his own will.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," she said, "but I'm not going early to-morrow, Dick."

Dick felt sheepish and uncomfortable, while all the strength of his nature protested against such feelings in the presence of others. He turned to Peggy, and began to talk to her about Hillside.

"You must come again to see it in spring-time," he said. "You will not take it for the same place."

"Thank you very much. I'm afraid I can't be spared," she answered, while her mother stared with surprise.

Peggy had not confided the details of Mrs. Limber's rudeness to her mother, and she only remembered the fondness the girl had for Elsie. She was puzzled, and she felt there was something unexplained, but prudence kept her silent.

Dick was asked to spend the rest of the evening with *them*, and Elsie played and sang ; Peggy watched Dick's

constrained manner toward his cousin with some surprise, yet a certain devotion in his look made her more and more sure of the attachment she had suspected at Hill-side—at any rate, on his side. Elsie's manner puzzled her. At the farm she had often been cross with Dick; now she was cheerful, and seemed to try to be kind.

She did not once laugh at him, or show any of the petulance which Peggy had noticed during her stay at Hill-side. Mrs. Short, too, noticed Elsie's manner, and thought that certainly she gave encouragement to young Mr. Limber.

As the evening went on, Dick took courage. Elsie had changed for the better, he thought; she looked healthier and prettier, and certainly her manner was kinder to him though it was not quite what he wished. She was too much at her ease, he thought, and she seemed to think she was quite as old as he was. He liked Peggy's amusing talk and shy, deferential way better, and he wished Elsie had a little of the latter; yet, as he walked home to his inn, he called himself a fool for being dissatisfied ever so little with so perfect a creature as his cousin.

"The sweetest girl I ever saw in all my life," he said to himself, as he went along the narrow streets of the quaint old town.

"A very fine young man, that, very." Mrs. Short was *saying* good-night to her visitor. "You think so, I'm sure, Miss Neale,"—she said this after she had kissed her, *keeping her eyes fixed on the face so near her own.*

Instead of blushing, Elsie laughed.

"Yes, I think Dick is very handsome, and he's a kind, good fellow, too. I wish he would marry some one very nice"—she gave a glance toward Peggy—"and give me another cousin."

Mrs. Short gave a little laugh.

"Are you going to turn match-maker, Miss Neale? Good-night, my dear—but I think he's a marrying man." She took her candle from Peggy and walked away; at the door she stopped. "My dears, don't sit up very late talking to-night; you'll have heavy eyes if you do, Elsie, and your uncle and Mrs. Limber will say your visit here has done you harm instead of good."

The friends laughed, but, when they reached Elsie's room, Peggy remained silent; it was Elsie who talked for both.

"I can't bear to think that this is the last night," she said, brushing her long fair hair till it fell like a silken cape over the shoulders of her dressing-gown—"how I shall miss you, Peggy!"

"Think of me, then," her friend said, sadly; "you are the only real friend I have."

"Oh, Peggy,"—she had gathered the thick coil into one hand, and she sat holding it thus while she shook her head at her friend—"how can you say that? You have always your mother, and who is there at Hillside like her?"

Peggy was silent; she began to believe that Elsie was not frank with her.

"I can't think you are so very lonely at Hillside."

The dry, changed tone made Elsie look earnestly at her friend.

"Peggy!" that was all she said; but Peggy understood. Next minute her arms were round Elsie's neck; the coil of hair got loose and fell over Peggy as she hid her penitent face on her friend's shoulder.

"Well, dear, you looked so—so kind at him, I thought—indeed, I could not help thinking——"

Elsie drew herself away; she looked pale and distressed.

"Do you remember," she said, "you told me you were older than I was; but you want one experience, and I am glad you have been spared it—you have never loved; Peggy, if you had, you would know that one love is enough in a life."

"Forgive me, darling, I ought to have known; it was a lowering thought to have of you, only remember that I never knew about your love till all hope of dear Stephen's return was over."

Elsie turned on her with a glad, bright smile.

"Do not say that; I have never given up hope, and now I have more than hope." Peggy looked at her in sudden alarm. She began to think her friend was losing her reason.

"Sit down and listen. I will not keep you long because of your mother's words, but I want to tell you something, *Peggy*. Ever since this feeling came to me I have been getting better and brighter—it is so strong over me to-night that I feel as if I could sing for joy."

Peggy still looked wistful and scared.

"When did—did the feeling begin, dear?" she said, timidly.

"I never gave up hope, because how often one has heard of shipwrecked sailors coming home after long absence ; there have been real Enoch Ardens, Peggy."

"Well, I'll not contradict you ; but mother thinks there is no hope in this case."

Elsie smiled ; but the highly-strung look did not leave her face.

"Listen ; it was one night some weeks ago. I had been thinking of Stephen all day—but then there was nothing unusual in that—but I went to bed more unhappy than usual, because I had had a sort of dispute with Mrs. Limber. I felt almost inclined to ask your mother if I might come to Wortham at once ; and then I fell asleep—and I saw him," she said, slowly.

"Stephen !"—Peggy's blue eyes opened widely ; a strange, creeping sensation came over her.

Elsie bent her head. Said out in words her dream sounded so unreal that she grew red as she went on telling it to the wondering Peggy ; but at the end it seemed to the excited girl that once more she heard the joyful peal of bells, and saw the gladness in her lover's face.

"Yes, I am sure he will come back," she said, "and now you understand why I feel kind to every one, and why I must be at Hillside before Christmas comes."

Peggy stood lost in thought. Elsie's enthusiastic faith

in her dream swept away her friend's doubts ; but as she thought of Stephen's return, and then of Mrs. Limber and her projects, dark fears came between her and the vision of Elsie's happiness.

Ought she not to put Elsie on her guard against this woman more openly than she had done, and yet surely Mrs. Limber would not have been wicked enough to marry, still loving another man ; yet this romantic notion, as she called it, had got into Peggy's head, and it made her uneasy. On the other hand, if Stephen came back, it was far better that Elsie should never know that Mrs. Limber had loved him.

Elsie's voice broke into her perplexity.

"Don't say any thing sceptical. I am not superstitious, but have I not cause to hope ?"

"I am thinking ;" Peggy spoke gravely ; "it seems to me, dear, that it is a warning, and I believe you are right about Stephen, but I think something else too, Elsie."

"What is that ?" Elsie felt half impatient of her friend's serious manner.

"Well, I think such a warning is not sent for nothing, and I think you ought to be on your guard about Mrs. Limber."

Elsie looked grave now.

"I have thought so ; but then I have felt it was suspicious and wicked to have such thoughts. What makes you say this now ?" she asked, quickly.

Again Peggy hesitated.

No, she would not tell what she knew of Mrs. Limber ; it was such a dark thought for Elsie to take back and ponder over in that gloomy bedroom at Hillside.

"Several things have made me distrust her ; I fancy her great wish to see you married to her step-son, unscrupulous as she is, might tempt her to hinder any thing likely to prevent it."

A shadow fell over Elsie's face.

"And I am entirely in her power. Oh, Peggy, I ought never to have come away from Hillside ! Do you think, if a letter were to come for me from Stephen, that she would keep it from me ? I have sometimes been suspicious enough to go out to meet the postman, but that was during my illness ; since I have grown so much stronger I have thought myself morbid to do such a thing."

"Then you had better keep on being morbid. Now look here, Elsie ; I 'm not so clever or well read as you are, but, because my head is not often in a book, it takes in more sharply what goes on among people. Mrs. Limber does n't like you, and yet she is determined you shall marry Dick, and she will do her best to entangle you in some way or other with him, so that you can't get free. I do wish you would stay here ; Stephen may go first to you, but he will come and see us next."

Elsie stood musing, while she at last fastened up her hair.

"Perhaps you are right, dear ; but I feel drawn back

to Hillside against my will. There is my dream, too; remember it all happened beside the sea; and then there is Uncle Edward's wish that I should live at Hillside. No, I must go back; but you are quite sure now I don't love Dick, Peggy, except as a cousin."

A warm, silent kiss was all she got for answer, and then the two friends said good-night.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. LIMBER PUTS ON THE CURB.

IT wants only a few days now to Christmas, and Mr. Limber has been surveying the poultry this morning, pointing out to his factotum, Sam Brown, the special turkeys and geese he wishes killed and packed for his London friends. He looks brimful of content as he watches the handsome purple-black creatures strutting about, their combs and necks redder than usual, for Patch, the one-eyed bull-terrier, has come to the door of the house-place, and stands there keenly watching the scene.

Mrs. Limber, who has just come out shivering from the house-place, looks glum as she listens to the extent of the massacre her husband is contemplating.

"I'm sure I don't know what your London friends do for you," she says; "they write to you sometimes, that's all. I call a letter a cheap way of earning a turkey."

Mr. Limber walks away whistling very much out of tune. He is willing to be guided by his "Harrie" in most things, but he does not like to have his liberalities interfered with. Presently he comes back to his wife.

"I say, Harrie," he says, "never mind the turkeys, I'll see after them, tell me what's come over Elsie; she gets more cheerful every day. I believe going to Wortham's done her a world of good. She's getting over her trouble, after all.

Mrs. Limber had seen the change in Elsie's spirits directly the girl returned to Hillside, but she did not attribute it solely to change of air. She was puzzled to account for the girl's persistent brightness, and the look of hope in her eyes, but she was greatly surprised to hear that her husband had also noticed it, and his words set her thinking as she walked back into the house-place.

"Can she have heard news of Stephen? He was very strong and active. I've heard him say he could swim like a fish. He may have been saved, after all. Saved!" Her heart beat tumultuously at the thought. "Ah! but saved for her." She stood thinking, with her fingers to her lips. Poor Dick is feeling happier about her. Only yesterday he said she behaved like an angel to him at Wortham and on the journey home. No, Dick sha'n't be disappointed—she shall never marry Stephen Brent."

Anger and pride made Harriet Limber feel almost beside herself. She could not get the mastery over the *passion this idea had raised*. She had fancied that the

thought of Stephen Brent and her intense jealousy of his love for Elsie had been subdued, had almost gone out of her life, had become a slain foe whom she need never more dread ; and now to find this old terror risen, as it were, from the dead, and bringing with it the overthrow of all her hopes, was more than she could bear.

She wondered whether Dick saw any thing unusual in Elsie's manner. Since the evening of his return, Mrs. Limber had avoided her usual talks with him ; for it seemed to her that Elsie was less friendly to her than she had been before she went away, and she was anxious to lull any suspicion the girl might have of her good intentions. In talking to Elsie, she had not mentioned Dick ; she had seemed only wishful to hear all that happened during the girl's visit.

If she had known the real cause of Elsie's brightened eyes and complexion, and the hope that shone in the former, Mrs. Limber would not have been disturbed.

More than once during the past summer, when the girl had come in from pacing the cliff, white and exhausted, with sorrowful, weary eyes, Mrs. Limber had told herself that Elsie's wits were going astray, and that probably she would soon follow them. She scoffed at what she called superstition of any kind, and this belief in a dream, and building up expectation on it, would have been to her a convincing proof that Elsie was becoming crazy.

There was a roaring fire in the house-place, and Mrs. Limber stood before it, warming her hands. The New

Year was close at hand, and Elsie had said she would give up hope of her lover's return at the end of the old one.

"I'm sure it does n't seem much like Christmas," she said ; and truly, between her constant chafing against her lot in life, and the constant scheming for Elsie and Dick, Mrs. Limber's gayety had departed. She had quite lost the racy humor which had once amused Mrs. Mainwaring, and the easy, playful banter which had charmed the Vicar of Barford, and gained the loving admiration of Peggy Short. She was aware of a change in herself, and, scarcely knowing what it was, she was also aware that her influence over her husband had lost some of its power.

Yes, Elsie had been her bad angel here also. All pleasantness had vanished from her intercourse with her step-son ; their frequent disputes and arguments had quite changed Dick's tone ; he had lost the half-playful deference and unfeigned admiration with which he had regarded his father's young wife, and, although he still relied on her skill and ingenious management with an almost fatalistic implicitness, there was in his mind a dogged distrust of her motives.

And Mrs. Limber was right in ascribing this to Elsie's influence, though not quite in the way she meant. It was simply that Dick's love for his cousin and his appreciation of her had raised the tone of his mind in reference to her, though his desire to win her left him still too

ready, when he was in the mood, to listen to his scheming step-mother.

He was coming in search of her now, and she heard his sounding footsteps crossing the hall.

When he came in, the sparkle in his eyes and the flush on his cheeks betokened success, and Mrs. Limber suddenly felt almost breathless with expectation.

"What is it, Dick?" she said, with most unwonted impulse. "Have you been having a talk with Elsie?"

"No; but, I say," he said, eagerly, "that's just what I want you for. You said I'd better not speak till after the end of the year, but—I think I'm losing time. She's quite changed; she never snubs me, and, though she's always pacing up and down there by the sea, she never looks miserable now. By Jove! I believe I'm a fool to listen to you."

Mrs. Limber smiled; she was calm again now.

"Don't you see, Dick, that the happiness which has come to your cousin is the result of your having followed my advice; it's better to be a day too late than a day too soon; you can't be losing any time, if she's getting over her folly. She certainly has seen no one she could take a fancy to. You are fond of finding fault with me but you give me no credit or thanks; I am always at work for you, and I have taken the trouble to find out that the only man who came to Mrs. Short's was Mr. Gordon, and he admires Peggy."

"Does he, though? does she care for him?"

"Very likely ; but what can it matter to you ? I only want to show you that Elsie has had no chance of attaching herself to any one."

"So much the more reason why I should speak. I tell you I will. I can't, and I won't wait any longer."

"You foolish, impatient boy ; yes, there 's no use in looking sulky, and you are a boy when you talk like that. I tell you that your reticence and respect for her feelings have won Elsie's respect, and given you a claim on her. She told you to wait till the end of the year, and by waiting you fulfil your part of the agreement."

"She made no promise," Dick said, sullenly.

"I know that ; but won't you give her a chance of being generous ? And who can say what her respect may lead to. Some women—fools they are—are conquered and won by the violence with which a man shows his love, while that is just the sort of love they should distrust, for it never lasts."

Dick looked unconvinced.

"I don't want respect or generosity,"—he quite overlooked the fact that his step-mother was in the middle of an argument—"I want to make Elsie love me," he said, doggedly.

"Let me finish ; if you had not interrupted me in your perverse way, I was going to show you that Elsie is much more likely to be won gently and quietly than in any other manner ; and I tell you that all this while you have *been winning her against her will—without her knowledge.*"

Dick's face softened ; the sparkle came back to his eyes and the flush to his face. His step-mother thought he looked irresistibly handsome.

"Is it so really?" Her last words had been so sweet that he longed to hear them again ; they had soothed his longing for Elsie's love. "Then you really think"—he fixed his eyes on her intently—"that this change in Elsie means good to me?"

"What else can it mean, you foolish fellow?" She laughed out joyously ; for a moment she looked bright and young again, it seemed to her that, now Dick was worked up to this pitch, only a miracle could separate him and his cousin. "In less than a fortnight the year will be over, and then do as you please. Who knows? you may perhaps find Elsie impatient of your silence, and ready to be yours at once."

Dick grasped her hand.

"Forgive me—I believe you 're a real friend," he said; "but don't think hardly of a fellow if he gets impatient and can't always see as it he ought. You see, you never had trouble of this kind ; you married father right straight off, without let or hindrance, as they say."

He felt a little shy, and glanced at her as he spoke, but he need not have feared he had said any thing disturbing—she looked perfectly unmoved.

"No,"—she gave a little laugh—"our love was not crossed, as people say, so there is trouble yet in store for us, perhaps. Yes, yes, my dear fellow, I make every al-

lowance for you ; you will make it up to me some day I 'm sure."

Dick had told his father that, if he married Elsie, he should continue to live at Hillside, and give a certain part of his income as rental and for the improvement of the farm, which, according to the elder Mr. Limber, was capable of trebling its value if certain advantages were bestowed on it.

" All right," Dick said to his step-mother, " I sha' n't forget ; I 'll try to keep quiet, though it tries a fellow's nerves more than I can say to see her forever on the edge of that rotten cliff pacing up and down, up and down."

He nodded and went away, leaving his step-mother much happier than he had found her

But her content did not last.

No, Mrs. Limber could deceive Dick, but she had a terrible conviction that the attraction which, much to her surprise, had brought the girl back to Hillside, had something to do with Stephen Brent.

And this belief had gained so strongly on Mrs. Limber since Elsie's return that she had grown nervous and easily startled ; it seemed to her that the girl must have heard news, and that at any moment Mr. Brent might be announced.

She had sat down on the wooden bench beside the fire when Dick went away, now she got up and raised her head as if she would fling these thoughts away from her.

"I am not a fool," she thought, "I never was one, or where should I be now?—in a workhouse most likely. If years take away one's freshness they put an edge to one's wits. I must be an idiot if I let those two meet. I must so contrive that Stephen, if he comes, shall go away again; he shall believe that Elsie loves Dick, he shall," she said, imperiously. "What is there to stop me? A few lies!—I have told enough in my life already—lies in a good cause don't count; besides," she smiled scornfully, "I aim at being a good wife, and Richard has set his heart on this marriage."

CHAPTER IV.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

ELSIE was far too much absorbed in her dream of hope to heed any danger from the cliff, and indeed her tread was so light that, unless the soil had already given way, she was not likely to loosen it.

Christmas Eve was close at hand, and she should see Stephen; of this she was fully persuaded. She believed that her dream had been sent in answer to her often uttered prayer for resignation; it would have been to her simple nature a sin to doubt that her lover would return; and as each day brought Christmas nearer and nearer the intensity of her joy grew almost painful. She was so *restless* that she could not settle to any in-door occupation;

she could not read, she could not even write to Peggy Short ; her only solace from impatience was in pacing the edge of the cliff. She thought that Mrs. Limber's manner was much kinder, and that Dick had greatly improved. It was such a comfort that he had given up making love to her ; and then she went dreaming on into the happy future, and saw herself cherishing Dick's feelings for Peggy and bringing them together ; for she was sure that her cousin had cared for Peggy, and that but for Mrs. Limber all would have come right between them. Mrs. Limber would no doubt be kind to Peggy when she found that her other plan had failed. Elsie was not in a mood to believe in evil.

After all, his step-mother had only tried for Dick's sake ; it was but natural she should wish him to marry a rich girl instead of a poor one. Elsie was so full of love and buoyant hope that she could not judge any one harshly. She only wished she could relieve her heart of some of this pent-up joy ; If she had Peggy here, how sweet it would be to hear her repeat the full and frank confirmation she had given to her hopes. She wished that she had told Peggy sooner of her dream, but she had feared to find her incredulous ; it was only to set her mind at rest about Dick that she had told her at all, for it had seemed almost wrong to tell what had been such an inward revelation to herself.

"I will write to her," she thought ; "I will go home and write now, and then she will answer and say again all the *comforting words* which made me so happy."

She put one hand up to shade her eyes while she gave a farewell look over the sea, and then turning homeward the wind, blowing straight from the land, forced her to bend her head and hold her hat tightly with one hand as she walked briskly to the farm-house.

A pony-carriage was standing at the gate, and she saw that it was Mrs. Collingwood's. Elsie felt guilty, and she blushed. In her present happiness, she had been ungrateful and unsympathizing to this kind woman.

She met Mrs. Collingwood in the hall, and she returned her kiss with a warmth that delighted the squire's wife.

"How much better you look, dear!" then she turned to Mrs. Limber, who was following her to the door. "I told you Elsie wanted change," she said. "There are few such good cures as thorough change; monotony"—her large blue eyes looked pathetic,—“whether of scene or of society, dulls and palls, and in the end destroys vitality; the very atmospheric changes of our climate tell us that freshness which means new life can only be got by the friction caused by change. My dear, even your walk as I saw you coming told me how much better you are.”

Elsie smiled.

"May n't I get in and drive with you part of the way?" she said.

Mrs. Collingwood was delighted, and, as soon as they were seated, she bowed to Mrs. Limber, and they drove away.

Mrs. Limber went on smiling till she had shut herself up in the dining-parlor, and then she no longer looked amiable.

"Why does that pedantic fool take such a much more intimate tone with Elsie than she does with me? She will never discuss a subject with me, passes by it and talks of something else, of house-keeping or dress, as if she thought she must fit her talk to my capacity. Well," she laughed. "I'm glad to be spared her inflated jargon. I'm sure I hope Elsie enjoys it. Such stuff, kissing like dear friends, when they've scarcely met for months past."

Meanwhile Mrs. Collingwood was surprised by her companion's brightness.

"Do you know," she said, impressively, "that you have a great gift? Life, as I have told you before, is only worth living for the perfect moments to be found in it; moments of love, of joy, and, beyond these, of the perfect enjoyment of intense beauty, whether it be found in mere nature or in work of man's creation. You gave me one of those perfect moments just now."

She spoke without any apparent enthusiasm, calmly, with her great blue eyes fixed on the straight horizon line of green down before her.

"I am very glad," Elsie said, "but I was not conscious of it."

"You must have been conscious of happiness, or you would not have emitted it so powerfully. Oh! my dear, it is comforting to talk to you; last summer I thought

differently, now I see you are able to possess ~~your~~ soul, and even to retain a power of creating joy in it, though you live alone on the hill-tops. I have lived this life so long by myself."

She gave Elsie a smile of sympathy, and drove faster along the road.

"You told me this before." Elsie hesitated, and then it seemed absurd not to be frank with this out-spoken woman. "May I say," she went on, "that I do not see why you should be lonely. You have every personal advantage, and the means of enjoying life, and—and——"

She did not know how to express her real meaning, and she stopped abruptly.

Mrs. Collingwood had been looking at her while she spoke.

"You may say it out, Elsie. You will not vex me. You mean I have a good husband. That is the very point from which my loneliness begins. He is good, excellent, talented, honorable, and in many things our tastes agree, but, my dear, he grovels. He lets his soul lie with folded pinions, instead of flying with me into the region that lies open to the inquirer. He is so old-fashioned that he believes in all the old exploded superstitions."

"I am of the same way of thinking, as you know," said Elsie, with a half smile. "I am afraid I could not be cheerful without the help of these superstitions, as you call them."

Mrs. Collingwood's repressed excitement kindled in her eyes. They became darker and more luminous.

"No—oh no, do not say that! With you it is simply a question of habit. You are like a cured cripple who goes on using crutches when he can really walk without them. My dear, I feel in you a self-sustaining power. You can be yourself—you can be good and loving, and control your impulses, and use your faculties without wasting their power in mistaken directions, whereas, if you were to persist in the ignorant old method, you would waste both tissue and mental force in seeking for what a Higher Power, as you call it, thinks right. My dear girl, you can do as much in one life by the new means as in three by the old; and this is just the point on which my husband and I part company. He believes, and prays, and waits; I think and act, responsible only to my own will. But, dear Elsie you shall not trust to my words only. I will lend you some most powerful papers, and they will sweep every cobweb of doubt from your sweet, timid belief and set you free."

"But," Elsie said, "I am afraid I don't care to read these opinions. I am very happy in my own belief."

"Ah! my dear, that is so selfish, so one-sided. You may be happy, or think yourself so, but the new way will make you much more useful to others; and you will be able to promulgate it when you understand it."

"And yet, though you believe in it so strongly, you are not happy, not have you converted your husband," Elsie said, simply.

Mrs. Collingwood whipped her ponies. She felt stung by this answer.

Elsie went on earnestly.

"The old way, as you call it, teaches that a wife should reverence her husband. I suppose that means, think him more wise than she is. It seems to me that the old ways aim directly at lessening self-will in women especially, and that these new ways teach them to act entirely for themselves."

"Exactly. What is the good of a mind unless one uses it? and then, if rightly used, action must follow as a matter of course. You surely are not an advocate for the feeble helplessness of the woman of the last generation?"

Elsie laughed.

"No, but I am an advocate for home ties and home love. Did you not begin by saying that this new teaching had estranged you from your husband? and yet you say he has no faults. Do not think me presuming, dear, but I think a married woman's best friend must be a good husband."

Mrs. Collingwood was silent, but she looked vexed.

"Ah! I suppose Mrs. Limber was right just now. I told her she was wrong." Then, seeing that Elsie listened without speaking, "We were standing watching you before you came up, and, when I noticed the improvement in your looks, she hinted that you cared for her step-son."

She looked very earnestly at the girl; but Elsie's unmoved face reassured her.

"Does Mrs. Limber think that? I am sorry. I am sure my cousin does not think so."

Mrs. Collingwood's earnest look changed into a bright smile.

"My dear, I can't tell you how glad I am. Mr. Dick Limber is a very fine young fellow, but he is not suited to you. I can't fancy that you are really cousins. A wife with an original mind would not do for him at all. Then it is only the brightness of your own soul that has caused the change in you."

"Oh! no, no; but there is no use in talking about one's feelings, and you and I could never see them in the same light," she added, gravely, "unless you give up your new ideas."

Mrs. Collingwood gave a superior smile.

"I could not, they are myself. Oh! you need not trouble your kind little heart about me and my husband. He is happy enough here seeing after his land and his people, and we are excellent friends. I hoped you and I could have walked in the same lights; but I am not really lonely, there is so much to reason on and to prove in the universe, that our life is not long enough for all that one has to read and to write about. Now shall I turn round and drive you home, for we are getting too far for you to walk back."

Elsie touched her hand.

"*I will get out here, please,*" Mrs. Collingwood pulled up the ponies; "but first I want to say something to you

about myself. If I were to come to you suddenly one day and ask you to take me in, would you do so without any questions ? ”

She looked frankly and fully in her companion's face.

Mrs. Collingwood looked at her affectionately, then she freed one of her large, shapely hands, and clasped Elsie's within her thick driving glove.

“ Will you come now, dear Elsie ? Do, if you wish. I will send for your things directly we get home ; it would be so nice to have you, dear ; ” there was real affection in her eyes.

“ How kind you are ! ” Elsie pressed her hand between both hers. “ No, I will go home now. There is only a chance—just a chance—that I may wish to leave Hillside suddenly. You will forgive my not speaking more plainly. Thank you very much for saying I may go to you, if it should be necessary. ”

She stood in the road, watched her friend drive away, and she sighed.

“ Perhaps she wants a little real sorrow or trouble to bring her right, ” she said. She could not help feeling impatient with Mrs. Collingwood's way of speaking of her husband.

But her thoughts soon went back to Mrs. Limber ; it was a revelation to hear that she had ventured to speak of her feelings in this way to the squire's wife. It had occurred to Elsie that, when Stephen returned, Dick's step-mother would be disappointed, but this put it beyond

doubt, there would probably be a quarrel, and she would have to leave Hillside. It seemed to her that Stephen would surely write and announce his coming, and that she should ask him not to come to the farm, but to meet her at the Hall—it would be pleasanter in many ways—but she had not planned this beforehand ; a sudden inspiration had made her speak to Mrs. Collingwood as she had spoken.

Slowly and thoughtfully she took her way home ; there was a pale light far out at sea, almost as if day were breaking there, while the evening was closing over the land ; now and then the wind moaned, as if the sudden whirl with which it came was painful, and, when Elsie reached Hillside, the leafless branches shook and rattled under its violence.

She was glad to get in unobserved ; she knew Mrs. Limber would be vexed to see her come in so late.

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

CHRISTMAS Eve at last ! Elsie had meant to be up earlier than usual, but instead of that she slept late, and was only just in time to meet the postman at the door of the house-place, before he had taken the letters from his greasy brown bag.

There was only one addressed to Miss Neale, and that was in Peggy's hand-writing.

Before the postman had gone away, Elsie found Mrs. Limber beside her.

The girl was startled as she looked at her. Mrs. Limber's eyes were fixed so greedily on the letters in her hand.

"Good-morning," Elsie said, and then they kissed; the greeting was a very formal process now. "Those are all yours," she put three letters into Mrs. Limber's hand; "I have only one," and, as she thought of what Peggy's letter might contain, her eyes sparkled with gladness.

She moved away; she wanted to read her letter alone before breakfast.

But Mrs. Limber felt desperate. She tried to see the address; she wanted to satisfy herself that the letter was not from Stephen Brent.

"Mine are bills," she said, just glancing at the envelopes—"is yours from Peggy Short, Elsie?"

"Yes." Elsie spoke over her shoulder, for she had reached the foot of the stairs, but the near sound of Mrs. Limber's voice, as she spoke again, made her turn, and they stood face to face.

"Please tell me how she is," said Mrs. Limber. "Do you know, Elsie, I wish I had followed my own instincts, and asked her and her mother here for Christmas; they will be dull, poor things; do you think they would have come? Your uncle thought it was best to send them a goose instead. Please tell me how they are."

She was so close to Elsie that she could have taken the letter from her hand, but the interest in her face seemed so real that the girl was touched ; she did not think of attributing it to curiosity.

She looked down at her letter.

" I see it begins with a message which I am to give to uncle for his kindness in sending such a beautiful goose ; Peggy says she is sure it is the biggest goose in Wortham. She went on reading, " We mean to drink Mr. and Mrs. Limber's health after dinner, and—" Elsie stopped abruptly. Mrs. Limber fumed inwardly with impatience, but she said, easily,

" Go on, dear ; what else does she say about us ? "

Elsie looked red and confused ; then she gave a little, forced laugh.

" I won't read any more," she said ; " the rest would not interest you," and she ran up stairs without waiting for an answer.

Mrs. Limber stood frowning below.

" There is mischief in that letter, I know there is ; I can feel it." She remained several minutes in thought, her hand on the broad rail of the staircase. " If I were the woman I consider myself to be," she said, " I should follow Elsie up stairs and turn the key of her door. I could pretend she was ill. Dick and his father seldom go up stairs till evening. It would keep her safe to-day." She laughed at herself. " Why should any thing happen to-day ? Besides, Elsie would not submit tamely ; she would cry out and summon help." —

A sombre look crossed her face ; she had forgotten every thing but her intense longing to know the contents of Elsie's letter. Into this absorbed reverie came the bell summoning her to breakfast. It was not rung as a regular custom, only it had been established for Dick's benefit as he was often late in the morning ; it had never yet been used to summon Mrs. Limber. She started, but she did not hurry ; she felt to-day that she had need to be even more self-controlled than usual. She found Mr. Limber in the entrance-hall ringing the bell himself.

"Well, Harrie," he shouted, "fine doings indeed !—breakfast's getting cold. I began to think you and Elsie had gone off on a spree and left Dick and me to keep Christmas together."

He was a little alarmed at his own boldness, and surprised to get so sweet a smile in answer.

"Elsie kept me, dear, listening to a long message to you from Peggy Short about the goose. I think you had best ring again," she said, taking her place behind the huge tea-urn ; "it looked a long letter, and she may stay to read it through."

"Ah, well," he said, kindly, "let her be ; I'd be loth to shorten any pleasure of Elsie's, poor girl ! though I must say she's brightened up lately."

Elsie had not heard the bell ; she had no thought of time in the absorbing interest of Peggy's letter. She had stopped reading to Mrs. Limber only just in time. Peggy's letter went on :

“ ‘ And now I must warn you against your uncle’s wife. All this while, dear Elsie, because I feared to seem spiteful, I have been keeping from you something which I think you ought to know. You have made me believe that dear Stephen is living ; if this is true, I believe, when he comes back, he will go at once to Hillside, and I have a strong fear that Mrs. Limber will prevent you from seeing him. You will understand her motives when I tell you that I know she was once in love with Stephen, and that he did not care for her. I have learned lately that he even warned my father not to encourage intimacy between her and me, and this was why my mother was at first unwilling I should go to Hillside. I must tell you, dear, that I fear she still loves Stephen. I have doubted and debated about telling you this ; there did not seem absolute need for it ; but I cannot now resist the conviction that she would dislike your marriage with Stephen, even if she had not set her mind upon your engagement to your cousin.

“ ‘ Perhaps you will say I am exaggerated and foolish in my fears, but I feel obliged to send you this warning. I cannot help thinking that Mrs. Limber will try to prevent a meeting between you and Stephen. You see, dear, by the way I write of it, that his coming back has grown into a fact with me. I have not told mamma about your dream, she might be incredulous unless she heard it from you. You can judge how anxiously I shall wait for your next letter.’ ”

Elsie sat with her letter in her hand.

"Dear little Peggy! her love for me makes her a little unjust. It was not the poor woman's fault if she did love Stephen; but she ought not to have married with this feeling."

Elsie went on thinking. She could not remember that Mrs. Limber had ever blamed her engagement; on the contrary, she had advised her not to tell Mr. Martin till Stephen's return, and until the news came of the shipwreck she had not urged Dick's suit. Elsie smiled a little sadly. She thought Peggy deceived herself in thinking that her distrust of Mrs. Limber was caused by her love for herself; dislike to Dick's step-mother had probably something to do with it.

"It is curious," Elsie thought; "I believe this knowledge softens my feelings toward the poor woman; it must be so sad to have loved without hope, and I cannot believe she could be so wicked as to go on loving a man who is not her husband."

She went down to breakfast, and, when her uncle teased her for being late, she gave him Peggy's message.

The farmer rubbed his hands delightedly.

"You must tell her we want to see her again. She must come as soon as the new year's turned."

Elsie looked up laughing, and she met Dick's eyes; they were full of loving admiration, and Elsie felt that *the color* came into her face. This soft, rosy tint seemed *to darken the liquid depth which happiness had brought to her sweet blue eyes.*

Dick thought she looked lovelier than ever. He noticed, too, that the dainty, cared-for look had come back to her, and that her fair, silky hair, which for months past she had worn strained tightly from her face, waved now in the graceful, careless fashion in which she wore it two years ago.

Love stirred strongly in Dick's heart. He now really loved his cousin, and wanted her for his wife.

A fresh idea did not explain itself quickly to him, and he sat pondering over the meaning of this change in Elsie. There was something about her this morning that he had not seen before ; what did it signify ? He spoke to her.

"You look very bright this morning ; did you have pleasant dreams ?"

She blushed deeper still, but she was not vexed ; she smiled as she answered,

"I did not dream at all, I slept like a top ; but is n't it a beautiful day ? I'm so glad."

Mrs. Limber looked at her suspiciously, but Dick was growing happier every moment. His father had told him that Elsie was coming round, and so had Mrs. Limber—and, by Jove ! he thought, they were right. He had found the way at last ; his silent devotion had touched her heart ; Elsie meant to be his wife.

The nail that takes the longest to drive in, is often the firmest of the row ; and, now that this idea had at last given up *its meaning* to him, Dick was impatient to act *upon it*.

He looked impatiently at his father, but there was still one side of his newspaper unread. Dick could have stamped at the farmer's slowness. He looked at Mrs. Limber, and he saw that she was watching Elsie.

Leaning back in his chair, he stretched out both arms and indulged in one of the yawns forbidden by his step-mother.

"How you startled me," she said.

"Well, I thought it was time. Are you going to stay here all day?"

She had on her tongue the words, "Well, but how can that affect you?" For indeed Dick seldom shared the family breakfast. Usually the others had dispersed before he appeared. But, as she looked at him, she was silent. His face was flushed, and he seemed excited. As her glance went on from him to Elsie, the likeness of expression puzzled her—it was one of intense expectation. Had she been wrong, after all; and would it not be wise to leave these two to understand one another at last?

"Richard dear, could you give me five minutes in the poultry-yard?" she said. "I want your advice about some trellis against the house."

This was a compliment; for Mrs. Limber had given up even the form of deferring to her husband's opinion, and usually took her own way in matters relating to decoration, either in the house or the garden.

"By all means, my dear," the good-natured man said. "*I'm at your service, ma'am.*"

He folded up his paper, and followed her out of the room

CHAPTER VI.

AN ANXIOUS MOMENT.

THE coast was clear. Mrs. Limber had not rung the bell, so there was no chance of interruption ; but Dick hesitated. It seemed to him that he was going to run a great risk ; to put all the happiness of his life at stake in one hurried minute—was he sure enough of the result ?

He looked at Elsie.

She had sat quite still. Really she was wanting him to go ; she wished to finish a letter she had begun to Peggy ; she meant to tell her friend to feel happy about her on Christmas Day, and not to dread Mrs. Limber's interference.

Her eyes were fixed on the floor, but there was still the sweet, bright look on her face. Dick felt his hands tremble nervously, but he went round the table, and stood beside her.

"Elsie."

She started, and looked up at him ; there was such unusual softness in his voice. Her frank, kind glance took away his confidence. He would have gone on more easily, *if she had blushed again*, but she did not even *look confused*.

"Elsie, dear,"—his voice shook as he went on—"won't you try to love me—just a little? I don't ask for more. More will come after, if you will only try."

She smiled at him brightly still.

"But, dear Dick, I do love you; I always mean to love you. You are the only cousin I have in the world."

"Don't Elsie—not that; I don't want that sort of love. I want you to be my wife," and he bent tenderly over her.

Elsie did not shrink away, she rose from her chair and took her cousin's hand in hers, looking at him so steadfastly that the young fellow felt as if he were under a spell, and bound to be silent.

"Look here, Dick," she said, earnestly, "I will tell you something that I cannot tell to any one else here. I know—not by a letter or any thing that you would call real knowledge—but I know that Stephen Brent is coming back—he is coming to-night."

Dick stared in utter surprise, and a feeling between fear and repulsion took possession of him. Had his step-mother been right, then, when she said Elsie was crazy.

"Ah! you don't believe me," she spoke in a bright, excited way that puzzled her listener still more. 'Listen, Dick. I learned this in a dream, I saw him quite plainly, and I heard first the Christmas bells telling me, and then his voice.

Dick was relieved. She might believe in a dream without being crazed, though, of course, one case was as unreal as the other.

"But, Elsie darling, you cannot believe this ; if I had thought there was any hope of his return, I would not have spoken, but this is the wildest fancy I ever heard of. The poor fellow was drowned long ago ; you said yourself it was wicked to go on hoping so long."

"This is not hope, it is certainty—I am sure—oh, so very sure !"

Her eyes lighted up as she spoke.

"Dick," she went on, earnestly, "if he does not come, I will forfeit any thing you like."

She had let go his hand, but now he grasped hers tightly.

"Let that be a bargain, Elsie—forfeit yourself ; if Brent does n't come, say you will marry me in a fortnight."

His blue eyes were almost black with excitement ; as Elsie looked at him she grew white and trembled. Presently she laughed.

"Ah, you don't believe, I see, and you want to try me. Yes, if he does not come to-night, I will marry you in a fortnight. Now do you believe ?"

"I hardly can that you would do that—it seems too good to be true. Now here's father, say it again before him, or, if you are shy, I will say it."

Mr. Limber had come in for his newspaper, but his son's excitement roused his attention ; he looked from one to the other while Dick said, slowly,

"If certain circumstances do not arise, then, Elsie, you *promise to marry me in a fortnight.*"

Elsie was grateful to him for keeping her secret ; she was much too over-wrought to think of the unpleasant position he put himself in by owning his attachment before his father.

“Certainly, I promise.”

The farmer smiled at her with fatherly affection. Coming round to where she stood he kissed her.

“Do ye say so, my dear child ? That’s the best bit of news I’ve heard this many a day.”

Elsie was dazed—it had all passed so quickly ; and yet she dared not speak of her hope to her uncle, she was so sure he would at once tell Mrs. Limber. She felt frightened, discouraged ; she wished now she had not told Dick, and yet it had seemed the only way to satisfy him.

Surely, as she had been so frank, he would be true to her. She turned to leave the room, but Dick was very near her.

“I trust you,” she said, in a low voice ; “remember I have put my happiness in your hands.”

Then she went away, and the two men looked at one another. Mr. Limber brought his hand down heavily on his son’s shoulder.

“Give you joy, Dick—she’s as good as she’s pretty, and as pretty as she’s good, and I take it that’s all you want. You’re not like me ; you’ve had schooling, and you know all the ins and outs of things as well as she does.”

“Thank you, father.”

But the older man was surprised at his son's reticence ; he usually corrected his father pretty freely, and the farmer was not quite sure that his congratulations would be approved ; but Dick did not know what he said, or whether he was awake or asleep. One minute it seemed to him that Elsie was a coquette, that she had been merely trying her power over him by the pretended dream story, and that she really meant to be his wife—and the next he saw her in the arms of Brent, lost to him forever.

"No, by Jove ! if the fellow had been saved, he could have been here long ago, instead of letting the poor darling almost break her heart. If he's alive, he's been playing truant, making love elsewhere, I'll be bound ; and does Elsie think I'll stand by and see him carry her off ?—not I."

He longed to ask his father's opinion about this dream of Elsie's, but he would not reveal her secret. That "I trust you, Dick," lingered in his ears.

"You would like to have her for a daughter," he said, "would you not, father ?"

"It's the very thing I want of all things, Dick ; she's like one of us already ; there need be no change."

He hurried out of the room ; he wanted to be the first to tell the good news to his wife.

She was not in the house-place, but he found her in the kitchen, giving her orders for Christmas. But Mr. Limber could not wait ; he was afraid that Dick would tell his *good fortune before he could get the chance, and he knew the pleasure it would give to his wife.*

"She's been in the doldrums of late, poor pet," he said to himself; 't will bring her round to think the wedding likely."

"Come along, ma'am," he said; "I want you now directly, I've something to say that's worth hearing. You shall go back to cook when I've done with you—eh, Bab?" he nodded to the broad-faced, broad-backed woman whose round, calf-like eyes were fixed on her mistress. "I've had no thanks for putting up the new copper for boiling the pigs' food in, an' it must be a mortal savin' of labor to you to have it so handy."

"That it is, master, an' Ah've bin a goin' many a time to say so, but something or n'orther's come in the way."

"Never mind; but I say, Harrie, come you along quick—I won't keep you." Then, as soon as they were in the passage, he said, "I've got such news for you, my pet."

Mrs. Limber was following her husband, and, even if he had looked over his shoulder, the passage was always dark; she could not keep her anxiety out of her face; was she going to learn that Elsie had tidings of her lover's safety?

When they reached the house-place, her husband shut the door, which on this side usually stood open, so as to allow a quick passage between kitchen and dining-room, and gave his wife a sounding kiss.

You were right, old woman, after all. She's promised to have Dick.'

Mrs. Limber looked wonder-struck; then she said, slowly,

"Elsie has promised to marry Dick? Who told you so?"

"Nobody, my dear. I have it on the best authority, my own hearing—eh, Harrie?"—pinching her cheek, and then patting her shoulder. "What do you say to that, my duck? And we are to have the wedding in less than no time—in a fortnight, Elsie said. She actually seems to have fixed the time herself. Poor Dick! he looks dazed, as if he thought it was too good to be true."

"And you are sure it is true?"

Her voice sounded so hard and unbelieving that her husband stared in surprise.

Cocksure. But, Harrie, you don't seem joyful. Why, I thought your heart was that set on the match that you'd be pleased beyond any thing."

"So I am," she forced herself to smile; "but I'm waiting to hear more. Tell me, Richard, how you heard this proposal of Elsie's?" she said, with a half sneer.

"I did n't say, my pet, Elsie actually made the proposal. Seems to me Dick had been pressing her hard as I came in. The door was ajar, and she'd just made him that answer—anyway, he asked her to repeat what she'd said, and then he said it over himself, and called me to witness, and Elsie said, "Certainly, I promise." And there's no getting out of that, as you know, ma'am."

"It's a queer story. Where is she, and where's Dick?"

"She ran away, as girls do under such circumstances, and Dick seems to have lost his tongue, so I came to find you and have the first telling, my pet. Eh, what do you say to it? I ought to have a kiss for such news."

"I'm very glad, I'm sure; but a fortnight is rather short to get wedding preparations done in. I must talk to Dick."

"You won't put a spoke in the wheel, my pet, eh?" The farmer was puzzled by her manner. "It's unlucky to put off a wedding, as you know, Harrie."

She gave him one of her sweetest smiles.

"Don't you be afraid, you dear old goose. You forget that the responsibility of seeing that all goes well falls on me, and it makes me serious to think about it all. I must have a talk with Dick."

"He's not far off, you may be sure. Looking for you, I'll be bound, to tell you his good fortune; but I've got the start. Shall I go and look for him, Harrie?"

"Oh no; I must go back to cook. There's no hurry. He's sure to come this way presently. Now go, dear."

She stood till he had departed, and then she clasped her hands listlessly together.

"I don't believe it!" she said to herself, he's infatuated with the girl, and I hate her worse than ever."

She controlled herself, went back to the kitchen, and answered giving her orders in so calm and easy a manner

Y₇₀ no one could have suspected the tempest that was at
to have within her.

At last she came back, and seated herself beside the huge fire.

Had she, too, disbelieved the story of Stephen's death ? or why was it that, the moment she heard of Elsie's consent, she felt determined to prevent the marriage ?

"Richard is a fool," she said, "but I am worse. For two years I have been striving and urging to get this settled, and now I feel that it cannot be—at least, she sha'n't live here, if she marries Dick."

She listened. Some one was coming along the hall. The door opened, and there was Dick—Dick without any of the triumphant joy in his face that she expected to see there.

Mrs. Limber was like an old traveller poring over the map of a country he means to visit ; she studied her stepson's face keenly before she began to speak to him. There was a lowering expression in his forehead and a droop about his mouth that warned her he was out of temper. Still she could not let him go away in silence.

"Well, Dick," she smiled, "so I hear you are at last successful. I congratulate you."

He looked at her angrily.

"You 'd much better leave me alone. Can't you see that I'm not in a temper to be congratulated or bothered ? What's the use of your cleverness if you can't see that ?"

He glared at her, and then, hurrying on, he passed out *into the chicken-yard.*

BOOK SEVENTH.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. LIMBER ON GUARD.

WHEN Elsie reached her room it seemed to her that she must have been mad to give her cousin such a promise.

She could not explain her words to her uncle, and they had given him false hopes. She felt frightened at her own rashness ; it would have been so much better to keep silence even to Dick.

But he knew that my words meant nothing when I said them ; he saw that I was excited ; his own love must teach him that I would die rather than marry any one but Stephen—my own Stephen ! ”

She said the name softly over and over again in fonder and more caressing tones, and then she hid her eyes in her hands ; her heart throbbed so with passionate joy that she shrank from herself.

Was it only a year and a half since she had walked with her lover along the cliffs toward Blackwater ? How *changed* she felt since then ! She remembered that she

had come back timid, shrinking from all the world ; now she felt strong and brave, her whole nature had kindled and strengthened—it did not matter if all the rest were against her, she would run any risk only to be safe in Stephen's arms, and to look once more in his dear face.

Still she shrank from going down stairs ; it would only provoke annoyance, for she felt sure that, even if Dick held his tongue, the farmer would tell Mrs. Limber what he had heard. She could hardly understand Mrs. Limber's wish that she should marry Dick. Did she still wish it ? It seemed to the girl that she had seen hatred in those dark, keen eyes this morning.

"It was horrible. I never met such a look before ;" and then she thought over Peggy's letter, which for the time had effaced the impression of Mrs. Limber's look.

"She may have dreamed too," the girl thought ; "she may believe that Stephen is coming, and she is jealous."

But Elsie's nature was too sweet to harbor such a thought ; she banished it at once as a wrong done to her uncle's wife.

"Even without this hope," she said, "my stay here must have come to an end. It is painful to feel as I do when I am with Mrs. Limber ; there is not a grain of sympathy between us, and, try as I will, I cannot believe in her."

She had resolved not to go to the flag-staff till it grew dark—at least, she would not go till after the second post had come in. It seemed to her that it must bring her a letter from Stephen.

The mid-day dinner was very silent. Dick did not speak, and his step-mother seemed absorbed in thought ; and, as Mr. Limber's attempted jokes met with no attention, he soon gave them up.

He was much puzzled, for he thought that Elsie looked a good deal happier than Dick did.

He told himself that the boy did not understand women as well as he did. There was, of course, he argued, a great advantage in having married two wives ; it gave a man the opportunity of studying temper and character, and steering his course accordingly. Dick had not had these advantages ; he had had no sisters, and his mother had always been an invalid.

"Still the lad might guess that a girl looks for something more than a glum face when she's just promised to marry him. Perhaps he's had a row with Harrie ; they have n't been such friends of late."

Not being able to make it out, he was extra attentive to Elsie ; he loved her dearly already, and it was a real happiness to feel sure he should so soon have her for a daughter.

The second post arrived just when dinner was over ; it never missed Hillside. A brother of Mr. Limber's, whom he seldom saw, sent him a daily paper ; this summed up the intercourse between them. A turkey and other dainties filled a hamper sent from Hillside every Christmas ; and another hamper, with a goose in place of the turkey, was also sent from Hillside at

Michaelmas. The brother sent a daily paper from the manufacturing town in which he dwelt ; no letters were interchanged ; it was understood that, when the daily paper or the half-yearly hamper ceased, death had parted the brothers.

Mrs. Limber had been watching Elsie, and she saw that she was restless, and that, when Mr. Limber spoke to her, she looked out of window. She took a secret pleasure in sitting at table longer than usual ; the double strain of jealousy had robbed her of her accustomed self-possession, and, instead of the smiling talk with which she would once have whiled the time away, she sat still, and did not interrupt her husband, as she usually did, to ask him to say grace.

Dick grew impatient of the situation.

"Are we going to sit here all day ?" he growled.

Mr. Limber rose, said a ponderous grace, and then Elsie and Dick rose from table.

The farmer's face cleared. He began to see that he had been wronging his son ; the poor fellow only wanted to get Elsie to himself. Ah well ! they had all the afternoon before them. He had meant to ask Dick to ride over to Blackwater to put some money in the bank, but that must stand over now.

Dick held the door open for his cousin to pass out, and Mr. Limber congratulated himself that now, at least, he could get Harrie's opinion, and learn if all was going on well.

To his surprise, she rose up swiftly, and followed Elsie out of the room.

"I'm blessed if I can make it all out," he said. "I should have thought Harrie too cute to go and play gooseberry-picker without being asked."

A fatalistic spirit had seized on Mrs. Limber ; it seemed to her that some mystery was being acted under her eyes, and that she must see it played out to the end. She did not speak to Elsie ; she watched her cross the house-place and mount the old staircase, and Mrs. Limber bent over the fire, affecting to warm her hands. She was too angry with Dick to speak to him unless he addressed her. He made no effort to do this ; he went out at once into the kitchen-yard and called loudly for Sam.

Presently Elsie came down stairs dressed for walking ; but, though Mrs. Limber did not even look over her shoulder, the girl was conscious of being watched, and felt glad to get away.

When she reached the outer gate by which the postman came in, she found Dick leaning against it. He got up and opened it for her to pass out.

"No," she said, "I only came to meet the postman."

Then she wished she had not spoken ; it would have been so much better to pass through and meet the postman before he reached the house.

"Who do you expect a letter from?" Dick said, *roughly*. "You had one from Peggy this morning."

Elsie hesitated ; then she looked frankly at her cousin,

"You know as well as I do," she said ; "be generous, dear Dick."

"That I'll be hanged if I will." But he said this between his teeth, though he felt he would like to hasten forward and possess himself of Elsie's letter.

Next moment the postman came in sight. He had a brown, weather-beaten face, nearly as brown as the greasy wallet strapped on his shoulder. His gray beard was blown on one side by the keen wind as he turned his head to speak to Sam Brown and to give him a letter.

Sam lingered behind when he saw his young master scowling over the gate. He would have liked to take the chance of a kind word from Miss Elsie, but Mr. Dick in a temper was a person to be avoided, as Sam knew from experience.

The postman touched his cap, and then handed the newspaper to Dick.

"Are there no letters?" the young fellow said, suspiciously ; a strange idea had come to him that Elsie's letter might have been given to Sam.

"No, sir. Perhaps there'll be some to-morrow. I wish you both a merry Christmas," he said, touching his cap ; "we're going to have a rare white one, I'm thinking."

"Thank you, Luke," Elsie said ; "I wish you the same," and she put her hand in her pocket.

Dick had recovered himself.

"Look here, Luke," he said, "give that to your little girl to buy a Christmas-box."

"And this." Elsie put her gift in the postman's hand, and he went off cheerfully.

"Are you going for a walk?" Dick said.

"I don't know; perhaps I shall presently—not just yet, I think."

Dick shrugged his shoulders and muttered to himself as his cousin went back to the house.

"That means you 'll wait till the coast is clear—you don't want my company."

His frown grew heavier; his whole nature was in revolt. Just when his hope had grown so strong, to be shown all at once that it had been groundless; that all her sweetness and brightness, which he had been putting down to love for him, had sprung from the visionary idea that a drowned man would come to life. He felt dogged—desperate even in his resolution that Elsie should keep her promise to him—and he lingered for nearly an hour beside the gate, watching the squabbles of the pigs in the dirty straw, and of some black and white ducks in the pond in the corner of the yard; he was determined not to lose sight of her.

When he came in there was no one in the house-place; he went on into the parlor to look for Elsie. His step-mother stood at the window looking out. In those low-ceilinged, low-windowed rooms it was already dusk.

"Where 's Elsie?" he said.

"I thought she had gone to meet you. She went out, with a cloak over her arm, a little while ago."

"Which way did she go?" said Dick, eagerly.

Mrs. Limber smiled.

"The old way, of course; straight across the downs. I should have thought no one in their senses would care to go in a keen wind like this, to the edge of that crumbling cliff."

"I'll go after her at once."

Mrs. Limber shrugged her shoulders.

"As you please. I've given up advising you; but I should hardly think it would please her to be watched and followed as though she was a baby."

He stared at her like an angry bull.

"Do you suppose, if there's danger, I'm not going to see after her?"

"I never said you should not do so. Do as you please. But, in your place, I should go round by the road to the flag-staff. This will not seem like following her; you may have been taking a walk in that direction."

Again he stared half wildly, half stupidly at her. Then he went back to the house-place again, and took his way through the farm-yard to the broad, white road, which ran to within a short distance of the flag-staff, but was much longer in reaching it than the narrow path across the downs.

CHAPTER II.

FROM THE SEA.

MRS. LIMBER had followed Dick to the house-place ; she seemed to have caught Elsie's restlessness ; there was a strange, feverish excitement in her eyes.

She shivered at the current of cold air let in by the opening of the door.

When Dick closed the door, she dragged the oak bench nearer to the blazing fire, stooped to take a log from the basket beside it, and flung it on the flame ; then she stretched her small, slender hands close to the warmth till the red blood showed through her clear skin.

Except that she drew her hands from the fire and shaded her face with one or them, she sat without moving, only perhaps the baffled look changed to one of intense mortification. She was looking back—back to the hopes that had come to her in her dead father's bedroom when she had felt herself at last free ; then she had felt that her foot was on the first step of the ladder—and the ladder was so high that it made her giddy to think of reaching the top.

Harriet smiled at the remembrance of a tall, fair singing-master who had worshipped her in silence for a quarter at the school, and then had slipped an offer of marriage into a song which he had lent her. She had never given him an answer. She had profited by the hints he

gave her for the improvement of her voice, and she had been very careful never to give him a chance of seeing her alone, till at last in despair, after more than one effort at correspondence, he had given up his post at the school, and Miss Gray had been appointed to succeed him.

Ah ! if she only had had patience and kept friends with Peggy Short, she might have been asked to the cottage at Wortham and have met Stephen again.

From what Elsie had told her, he had probably become a richer man than Mr. Limber was. . . . But here again she paused ; unless she had married him before his last voyage, she would have been worse off than she was now.

" Poor father was right when he warned me against feeling," she said ; " my feelings have injured me all through life."

Yes, she had made a bad bargain, had settled down into an inferior position, far below that which she had intended to take ; and as a crowning folly she had actually worked at her own downfall.

" I don't want another Mrs. Limber here, young and pretty," she thought, moodily. " Richard is besotted with her now—what will it be when she really is his daughter ? I watched him at dinner, he never took his eyes off her ; he 's never been the same to me since Elsie came back,"—she rested her chin in the palm of her hand with which she had been shading her face. " There 's Dick, too, he's

wholly unsatisfactory. I don't know what to make of the ungrateful fellow. What did he mean by sulking when I asked him about what his father told me?—in a fortnight—nonsense—it shan't be——”

She rose and stood leaning against the mantel-shelf; it was so high that her head only just reached to it.

“I've thought myself wise,” she went on, “and I'm only a fool. I want the money in the family; I don't want Dick to marry Elsie and take her away—and yet I won't have her here.” She said this between her firmly-set white teeth.

She thought how Elsie had defied her in the morning and how powerless she had felt; was it possible that in a fortnight this girl whom she hated would also be mistress at Hillside, with an equal right in the place to her own?

“Why do I say equal?” she said, passionately. “Dick will insist on her being paramount, and his father will follow suit; already I can see that Bab and Sam like her better than they like me. I shall be a mere cypher.”

She drew herself up and stood thinking. . . . She thought of the witness of a crime that had once lain under her feet . . . as she stood now on the old hearthstone, a terrible wish swept over her. In those old times people were found dead, and there was no fuss or inquiry; there were clever, imperceptible poisons, or sometimes a pillow *stopped the breathing*, and if removed in time left no trace.—“Ah! who's that?” she called out. Thought

had become so concentrated that the opening door seemed to betray her dark thoughts in their full horror.

She was conscious of a revelation in her face, and she tried to force it into a quiet expression before she turned to see who the intruder was.

She started. It was Dick, with a face as pale and scared as if he had been reading her thoughts.

“ Dick, why—— ? ”

Then, with a sudden burst of anger at his dumb, frightened face,

“ Don’t stand there like an idiot with your mouth open. What is it ? Where’s Elsie ? ”

“ I don’t know. I have n’t seen her. I went to speak to Sam.” Then he stopped and looked intently at her. “ Who do you suppose I saw coming up toward the farm from the village,—coming briskly along the lane ? ”

He waited, but Mrs. Limber did not speak, her strained eyes seemed to force him to go on.

“ Brent,—the fellow himself, I tell you ! ”

Still Mrs. Limber did not speak ; she could not, though her lips parted and showed her teeth tightly set together.

“ Can’t you say something ? You have only a minute or so to think ; he’ll be at the front door directly—curse him ! ” he called out with sudden rage.

He wrung his hands in a weak, despairing manner and roused her contempt. This brought back her courage and the power of utterance.

"Are you sure?" she said slowly.

"Yes, yes—it's too hard to give her up when she's almost mine!"

"Give her up! don't be a fool; if you're such a coward as even to dream of giving up, I won't help you, Dick."

She felt again full of confidence in her own power.

"Listen; don't you show at all, just leave him to me. Go to one of the upper windows and make sure Elsie doesn't come back. If you see her coming, go out and stop her, and take her back to the flag-staff. Be quick, you must go now."

She stood still an instant after he had gone—not to think—that would have unnerved her, but to smooth back some stray hairs and straighten her dress, just as she had done in her girlish days; then she went swiftly out of the house-place and across the yard, till she reached the gate. She looked toward the village.

Yes, there was a man, but not so near as she had expected, coming along the lane which led from the village to Hillside.

Her heart was throbbing strongly, and her fingers were cold and trembling.

"This will never do."

She forced herself to go slowly in-doors, and, going to the sideboard, she poured out some water and drank it. Then she took down a wrap in the hall and put it round her shoulders.

As she came out again, she saw the man coming up to the gate. It was Stephen Brent, but not the pale, half-drowned wretch she had often pictured him when she had thought of his return. He looked as strong and healthy as ever, and there was a prosperous look about him; the bright sparkle in his eyes stung her with mad jealousy. But in an instant he stood beside her, grasping both her small hands in his strong brown fingers.

She could not speak, but he said:

"Won't you say 'welcome' to a poor castaway sailor, Mrs. Limber?"

He smiled at her winningly; it was as much as she could do to keep from flinging her arms round his neck—all the old love stirred and throbbed in her heart—in her joy she forgot her husband and her jealousy—all the love she possessed went out to the man before her.

"Thank God. Where—do you come from?" she said, with breathless eagerness; "we have mourned you as dead."

Her eyes were full of love, but Stephen's eyes strayed over her shoulder into the house.

"I'll tell you every thing," he said, "but first, where's Elsie? I must see her."

Her hatred roused again and flamed out at her eyes. He could not give her even a word—she who had loved him for years! He only thought of Elsie.

"Elsie! Can you suppose that a girl like Elsie has waited all this while for you? If you had come a few

days later she would have been my daughter-in-law. Never mind Elsie, Stephen ; she has given you up."

She looked at him, and her dark eyes were full of the love she felt ; but the shock given by her words made him careless of all else, though he remembered afterward how strangely she had looked at him.

"What do you mean?" he spoke sternly. "Where is Elsie?—I must see her;" he went forward into the house. Mrs. Limber grew pale as she followed him; he turned and faced her. "Let me see Elsie—unless she tells me herself that she has given me up, I won't believe it."

A light came to Mrs. Limber. Just now a sudden panic had seized on her, for she had seen her husband coming from the turnip-field, and it had seemed as if all her schemes were defeated.

"You shall see Elsie," she said, so sadly and gravely that Stephen felt as if a chill wind blew over him; "though you don't believe me, perhaps you will believe my husband. Richard," she called out so shrilly that the farmer came hurrying forward; he thought something had gone wrong since he left the house.

Brent was standing within the dark hall, so that until Mr. Limber reached the door he did not see the sailor. Then he fell back a step and stood looking in open-mouthed wonder at the rescued man.

"Mr. Limber," his wife said, calmly, "before you speak to Mr. Brent will you please tell him who your *niece Elsie* is going to marry?"

"Why, Dick, of course;" the farmer had recovered himself, and he nodded and held out his hand to Stephen Brent. "My dear fellow, I'm glad to see you safe back. How is it you've stayed so long away? We never looked to see you again."

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" Brent said, vehemently.

The farmer stretched out his hand.

"There, there," he said, soothingly; "it does seem hard on you that Elsie should have changed her mind;" his slow, dull utterance carried a conviction to Stephen that Mrs. Limber's eager assertion had failed to do; "but such things will happen, you know, Mr. Brent. Don't trouble her happiness when the day's fixed and all—"

"The day fixed for her marriage?" Stephen interrupted, doggedly, between his teeth.

The farmer nodded.

"Yes, they're to be married in a fortnight sure and certain. I heard her fixing it with him."

Mrs. Limber had stood watching Stephen's face, there was a fierce struggle in it—even she could not guess what the end would be. She felt desperate and capable of any thing that would bring the end she aimed at. It seemed to her that a straw might turn the scale.

"But, Richard;" she spoke gently and looked at her husband, though she furtively watched the sailor. "I think, for old friendship's sake, Elsie would like to see

Mr. Brent." she saw that he looked still sterner. "Oh," she went on, eagerly, "I 'm sure she 'd like it ; only the other day she said to me, 'If I could only know poor Stephen was safe, I should be so happy.' Dear Mr. Brent," she turned to him, her face full of kindness, "you must forgive Elsie ; I think you could hardly expect so young and unformed a girl to withstand her cousin's love, they are so well matched ; made for one another, as my husband says."

She turned from Mr. Limber, who feeling puzzled had stuffed his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and was looking into the wall opposite him. She sighed and whispered to Stephen, "But I wish she had kept true to you."

Ever since Mr. Limber spoke, Brent had stood as if the news had stunned him, though the struggle in his face had shown intense suffering. He had seemed insensible to Mrs. Limber's soothing words, but this taunt roused him ; he turned away sharply.

"True ! there never was a true woman," he said, with a bitter sneer ; and without another word he went out at the gate and down the lane that led to the village.

CHAPTER III.

BY THE FLAG-STAFF.

ELSIE had run away from Dick, because under his watchful eyes she could not hide her disappoint-

ment, and she did not choose to let him see it. Her idea had been that she would not go to the flag-staff till it began to grow dusk, even then she would have many hours to wait. When she reached her room, she felt it would be easier to get through the time out-of-doors ; so she only rested a short time, and then wrapping herself warmly, and taking a thick cloak over her arm, she ran down stairs, again crossed the house-place without meeting any one, and went out by the front door. It seemed to her that the fresh sea-smell had never been so delicious as it was that evening, and though the wind came strongly in shore, and blew her loosened hair into her eyes, she stood braving it and delighting in the glow it gave. It was low-tide, and the mass of brown and golden seaweed still showed their rich color, though at the foot of the cliff it was already dusk.

Elsie hardly knew why she had come down on to the beach, unless it was because her impatience sought every means to shorten her time of expectation ; for, now that it had resolved itself into a period of hours, it seemed as if she could not bear the suspense. She went back to the cliff again. The evening was rapidly drawing in, and the wind was less keen. Elsie paced up and down, up and down ; she was trying to think, but her mind was too restless. Far off she saw that the tide had turned ; the slow approach of the waves chimed *in with her suspense*, she felt that she could *have no rest till her lover returned*. She thought she

would pace up and down in the darkness till he came, but at length fatigue conquered, and, wrapping herself in her cloak, she sat down on the bench below the flag-staff and closed her eyes.

She did not sleep, but she sat dreaming of Stephen, picturing his looks, his words, his greeting, and a warm glow of love and happiness rose on her cheeks.

It had grown quite dark when she opened her eyes; the stars had come out one after another, and were beaming down on her in silvery brightness.

Elsie threw back her head and looked up at the spangled immensity; high above her was the large lovely star that Stephen had pointed out to her as they walked along the cliff together; he had said that he should think of her when he saw it, and she wondered now how near he was, and if he could feel that she was gazing at the star. As she gazed, her eyes filled with tears, the brightness fled from her spirits, and she began to doubt whether she had been right in believing her dream, and that Stephen had not perished. It would have been impossible to her simple, child-like nature to doubt his constancy; if he lived, he would return to her; but now for the first time she wondered whether she had been presumptuous to anchor hope so strongly on a dream.

"But from the first I did not believe he was dead," she said; "I never gave up hope."

Drifting through this shadowy fear came self-reproach. She had been so completely absorbed by the thought of

Stephen that she had forgotten this holy night and the coming festival.

She stood up reverently and clasped her hands, and prayed that her lover's return might be blessed to himself and to her. . . .

When she thinks of her words she smiles; even in prayer she has not given up her resolute belief in his safety.

Then she sits down again and tries to picture the shepherds sitting out as she is doing, star-gazing, perhaps, and all at once becoming conscious of the heavenly chorus. But when she rouses herself from these thoughts her heart is heavier still, there is a weight on it that makes itself felt, and then seems to draw her to investigate it. Suddenly she starts up with an exclamation. The stars give so much light that there is no fear of a false step, and she walks close to the edge of the cliff. She knows now what has been pressing on her heart.

"I must have been mad to say it," she murmurs. "Anyway, it was wicked, for it has given the poor fellow hopes. Marry Dick ! I would sooner fall over onto those stones and be carried out to where perhaps my darling lies."

She forgets that she had only seen one side, that in her intense belief in the truth of her dream any other issue had seemed impossible; she has not felt that a feather's weight of reality lay in her promise. Why suddenly does *it feel like lead* ?

The night grows darker, the wind sends driving clouds across the sky, and by turns the stars disappear. The higher one overhead has not suffered eclipse, and Elsie takes comfort in this fact; it seems as if her fate is bound up in the shining of this guiding star, and as she gazes upward, peace once more comes to her. So she watches heedless of time, though wearied by its slow progress, pacing up and down, up and down, till the waves begin at last to leap less high, and their angry clamor changes to a sullen, monotonous roll on the stones of the beach.

CHAPTER IV.

DICK AND HIS STEP-MOTHER IN COUNCIL.

MRS. LIMBER felt more like herself than she had felt for months. The sight of Stephen Brent had thrilled and stirred her from head to foot. Her ideas seemed to come quickly, and her feverish blood urged her to take all requisite precautions.

Her husband stood still and stupefied till she passed by him on her way to the house-place; then he said, in a low, sad voice,

"This is a bad job, Harrie. Best not say anything to the poor girl."

Mrs. Limber kept down a rebellious smile by closing *her lips firmly*. She turned round and faced her husband.

"You think, dear, we 'd best not say any thing? Well, I suppose no one saw him but ourselves. Very well, I will be careful."

She went on and closed the door at the end of the hall behind her. Then she stood still and breathed more freely. At that moment she loathed her husband and shrank from him. . . . Once more the hope within her that had seemed dead rose up, and beckoned her after it. Come what would, Dick must marry Elsie now, and leave Stephen free.

She went up the staircase in search of Dick, and found him in a small room over the entrance, staring in the direction of the flag-staff.

He did not notice his step-mother's entrance till she came up and touched his shoulder. He started, and turned round.

"Well?" he said, impatiently, "how did you send him off so quickly?"

Mrs. Limber smiled. All her calmness came back when she saw that Dick was excited.

"It was your father's doing, not mine," she answered. "He told Mr. Brent your wedding was to be in a fortnight, and at that he went off very angrily."

"Did he really?" Dick looked thoughtful. "After all, I 'm sorry for the poor chap; I can't help it. To be half drowned—which I expect he was—and then to come home and find he's lost such a girl as Elsie is, it's hard lines!"

His step-mother's smile had broadened into a mocking expression.

"Well, if you are so sorry for him, it's not too late; you may overtake him before he reaches the village."

Dick frowned.

"I believe some women are devils," he said to himself.

"You know better than that," he said, aloud. "You said I shilly-shallied. Perhaps I did; but now my mind's made up, and Elsie has promised herself. No one shall take her from me."

He looked determined, and yet there was no boastfulness in his tone. Mrs. Limber felt a sudden accession of respect for him.

"There's one thing you have to do," she said. "You should not let Elsie out of your sight for a few hours—not till you feel sure he's safely off. Though he went off in a rage, he may think better of it, and come back, you know. Sometimes the best-laid plan fails from want of a little care at one end or the other."

The significance in her dark eyes annoyed him.

"I don't know what you mean about a plan," Mrs. Limber, he said, haughtily, "there has been no planning on my part. I waited weary months without saying a word, because you advised it, and I believe now I was wrong, by this time Elsie might have been my wife. She *made that* promise of her own free will."

"I wondered how it had come about," she said, dryly.

"Do you mean that Elsie offered to be your wife without your asking?"

"No, of course not that. You know she could not; she's the last girl who would do that. I saw a change in her—I've seen it for some days past—and I spoke my mind to her."

"You don't think," Mrs. Limber spoke slowly, and she looked hard at him, "or do you think, Dick, that she expected Mr. Brent?"

The question staggered Dick, and something in her face made him return her keen glance.

"What makes you ask that?" he said; "did you expect him?"

"I? You are talking nonsense. What possible claim had I on Mr. Brent's confidence? I——"

Dick took her two hands in his and held them tightly.

"You knew he was coming. You had the letter he wrote to Elsie."

His eyes were close to hers as he bent over her, and she cowered under their searching light. She knew that for once her face had betrayed her, and she gave up.

"Well, what if I did Mr. Sharpshins? and instead of glowering at me you should go down on your knees in simple thankfulness to me; do you really think, then, that Elsie would have promised herself to you if she had known that her old lover was alive?"

Dick muttered something, but he would not betray *himself*.

"I think Brent a greater fool than ever. I would not have given up like that. Why does n't he insist on seeing the girl and calling her to account for leading him such a fool's dance ; if she had told him she was going to marry me, he would n't have come—but I don't like what you 've done, Mrs. Limber, it 's an ugly thing to make away with a letter. You 'd best not let the governor know what you 've done. I don't know how he 'd take it ;" he gave her a slanting look out of his half-closed eyes.

"You 're very clever all of a sudden ;" she had flushed under his eyes, she was irritated that he had forced her secret from her ; "but perhaps if I knew all about the way in which Elsie gave her promise, you would not come quite well out of it. Come, come, Dick," she smiled again, and her dark face cleared, "you and I had best not quarrel. It may be Mr. Brent will have second thoughts and act on them, and in that case you must not let him see Elsie. Get her to go with you along under the cliff—the tide won't be up this long while—no one will dream of looking for you there ;" then seeing that he lingered, she said, quickly, "Do go, Dick ; if he comes back he 'll not be long about it, and if he sees you crossing the downs he 'll guess you 're going to Elsie, when I tell him she 's not in."

Dick went slowly away. He was troubled and unhappy ; he did not mean to give up Elsie, and yet he felt sure that if she knew Stephen Brent was alive she would not marry him.

But he wished he had held his tongue, and had not probed the mystery of that letter. How would it be if Elsie ever learned that her lover had written to warn her of his return, and had then come to claim her. Dick knew that Elsie's promise had been given in jest, or rather to show how she counted on Stephen's return ; but still he would have felt honest in claiming its fulfilment. Now he felt guilty, and awkwardly conscious of guilt ; it seemed to him that when Elsie became his wife, and learned that the sailor had returned, he should probably betray himself, and then what misery he should endure, for, gentle as Elsie was, he did not believe she would easily forgive a fraud of this kind.

He pondered all this as he crossed the downs on his way to the flag-staff ; but the crisp freshness of the air cheered him. He called to mind Elsie's kindness and sweetness. She had certainly taken pleasure of late in being with him. It was not likely that so good and loving a girl would inflict such pain on him as such a disappointment would be. No, she had given him her word, and she would not withdraw it, and then a vision of coming happiness swept over him, and he forgot all his doubts and fears and his step-mother's scheming suggestions.

When he reached the flag-staff there was no one in sight. He called Elsie's name, but not loudly, for he remembered that Brent might not be far off. The noise of the sea drowned his voice, and he could see no trace

of his cousin. He thought she must have gone down on to the shingle, and he went toward the inclined road. When he got half way down he suddenly stopped. It was possible that she had gone in-doors. Tea-time was near, and it was likely that she had taken the longer way home by the road, and there was a way up the cliff, a dangerous, broken track, which he had often scolded her for trying, and which was out of sight from the flag-staff ; the road to which this track led took its way behind the turnip-field, and by this time Elsie might be half way to Hillside.

Dick's heart seemed to stand still. The day's agitation had irritated his nerves, and his imagination was excited. He pictured to himself Stephen returning to the gate resolved to know the truth, or even to make an effort to win back the girl who had forgotten him, and Elsie, unconscious of all, meeting him face to face, and perhaps—who could say ?—flying into his arms.

When this occurred to him he could not stay to think or reason ; fear grew almost maddening, and although at first he stalked across the grass with long strides, very soon his pace quickened into a run, which lasted till he reached the yew-tree arch.

He went in-doors, but the lower part of the house was deserted.

He went up stairs to his step-mother's room and *knocked*.

"*Well, what is it ?*" very pettishly spoken.

"Open the door—be quick," he said.

If Elsie were in her room, she would overhear him if he spoke in the passage.

There was a look of alarm on Mrs. Limber's face when she opened the door, and it deepened when she saw his anxious face.

"May n't I come in?" he said, and without waiting for leave, he closed the door behind him. "Where's Elsie?—what has been happening?"

"Nothing; Elsie has not come in—you have missed her in the dusk. Go back and bring her in; she ought not to be there alone; it will be quite dark directly."

It was such a relief to find that Brent had not come back that Dick's anxiety quieted.

"All right," he said; "you must be patient with her to-night—most likely I did miss her—it was so dark down among the caves there; I know she wants to hear the Blackwater bells ring Christmas in.

"She can't possibly stay out till then," said Mrs. Limber; "they don't begin till eleven."

"Leave her to me," said Dick, "I shall have my supper, and then I shall go and bring her in; there's no use in fretting her now."

He laid a pathetic emphasis on the last word, and Mrs. Limber shrugged her shoulders as he turned away from her and went down the passage. She had made Dick's way clear for him, but to do this she had wofully fettered *her own future life*. For a few moments she stood before

her looking-glass balancing probabilities. She might even now recall Stephen, and free herself forever from Elsie's influence in her household, but to this gain must be counted the loss of Mr. Martin's fortune, and the final yielding up of all hope connected with Stephen. As matters stood, it was likely that his bitter disappointment would make him averse to marriage for years to come,—and then Harriet murmured to herself: "I must be free some day; when a man is more than thirty years older than his wife, there can be no harm in saying he must die first, and then——."

A look of triumph shone in her dark, lustrous eyes; she was radiantly happy at that instant.

She laughed softly at her own fears just now. She had actually been cowardly enough to think of yielding up this hope of finally winning Stephen, lest she should not be able to control her own jealousy of that pale chit, Elsie.

"It will only be a question of time," she said, "there shall be no striving for the first place on my side—I will be so sweet, and gentle, and yielding, that my husband will be obliged to see he is an old fool, and he will take my part against the young married people. Besides, it won't be for long; when Elsie finds out that Stephen is alive, she will pine like a bird in a cage. Dick won't make so indulgent a husband as his father."

CHAPTER V.

ELSIE AND DICK.

ELSIE did not know how long she had stood looking at the sea below ; spite of the darkness, the waves were marked out by the lines of white foam on which the starlight fell. She shivered, for it had grown very cold, but she wrapped her cloak round her and walked briskly up and down till she felt less chilled. Then she stood still again, looking down at the sea and listening to its hoarse murmur.

She wondered how late it was, and how long it would be before the bells rang from Blackwater. She was listening so intently that she did not hear advancing footsteps on the turf. In a minute she was firmly clasped round the waist.

"Come, come, Elsie," Dick said, "you 're out too late. I was obliged to take hold of you for fear of frightening you over the cliff ; you ought not to stand so near the edge in the dark like this."

"Let me go," she said, impatiently—"I'll come home by-and-by."

"No, no, you 'd best come now ; there 's father worrying his life out to know what has become of you."

Elsie drew her cloak round her and moved away.

"I can't help it," she said ; "I mean to stay here till the Christmas bells ring out from Blackwater."

"Nonsense ! you can't stay till then ; they won't ring

for nearly an hour yet. Now look here, I put father off as long as I could because I guessed what you were at, but he's in a real fidget, and, if we don't go back, he'll come to look for us. Come, come, Elsie."

Elsie looked at him ; the starlight fell on her face, and he saw how determined it was.

"You have had my answer, Dick—why don't you leave me alone?"

"Because I can't,"—he had worked himself into anger—"because it's not right for a young creature like you to be here alone on the cliff at this time of night. Come, come, there's a dear girl," he said, in a softer voice; "you are almost my wife already."

He had gone close up while he spoke, and once more he put his arms round her ; but Elsie drew herself away, and spoke haughtily.

"Your wife!—do you know what I was thinking just before you came? I thought I would rather drown on those rocks than be the wife of any one but Stephen—he is coming."

"He will never come," Dick said, bitterly. "Supposing he had escaped, even, he would have come home long ago if he wanted you. Why, how can you tell he is not married by this time? A girl should never trust a sailor," he said, sulkily.

She did not answer ; she stood a little farther from the edge, so as to give her cousin no excuse for supporting her.

Dick waited, and then he burst out, angrily,

"Look here, Elsie, did you mean nothing when you made me that promise? What right had you to say you would marry me, and to make me full of hope, if you only meant it as a mockery?"

There was a silence; then Elsie said,

"You knew what I meant—perhaps I was wrong to say that, but I never thought you would take it seriously. Oh, Dick, how can you wish to rob another man? and I tell you that Stephen is alive."

In the uncertain light she could not see Dick's confused expression.

"Well, we 'll suppose you are right"—he could not bring his tongue to deliberate falsehood—"but what I say is, the man has had plenty of time in which to come and claim you, and he has left you to pine and break your heart. Even if he came to you, do you think a fellow like that will make a good husband?—not he; he 'll find a fresh love wherever he goes."

Elsie walked away along the cliff; but presently she came back.

"Poor Dick," she said, "you know how sorry I am, and I am not angry with you for saying such hard things. Stay here, if you like, till the bells begin, and you will see that I am right."

She did not wait for his answer, but began to walk up and down again. Dick stood swelling with anger.

"Stay here, may I?" he said. "I wonder why the

cliff is more free to her than it is to me? Yes, I will stay here, and then I 'll take her home—by Jove! I will," he said, savagely, "and she shall marry me—she must keep her word."

He went and leaned against the flag-staff. He was too restless to smoke, that apparition of Stephen Brent had upset his whole life—all the building of fair hope and love which had been steadily rising to completion had tumbled about his ears, and he felt in chaos among the ruins, for, though Mrs. Limber had got rid of Stephen Brent, it was only for a time; it seemed to Dick that the sailor would go to Wortham and learn the truth from Peggy Short. A hot flush of shame rose when he thought of meeting Elsie's eyes after her discovery of the treachery that had been practised; but then he remembered the old saying that "All is fair in love," and, after all, he had been passive in the matter. Well, how could Stephen see Elsie, if Mrs. Limber resolved to prevent the meeting.

"There 's no bottom to her cleverness," he sighed. "Sometimes I think we should have done better without her; but we 've begun—we must go on with it now."

The main obstacle lay in his father. If the former were to meet Stephen, it was just possible he might bring him home; but even then Dick remembered, with comfort, how very much Mr. Limber's heart was set on having Elsie for his daughter.

"He won't give it up easily," he said; "father 's like

me, or I 'm like him, for that matter ; if he takes a thing in his head he sticks to it like a limpet."

He began to see that, if his greatest danger lay in his father, his greatest strength lay in him also. He believed that Mr. Limber's disappointment, when he heard of her refusal to keep her promise, would work powerfully on Elsie ; she would be so troubled at grieving her kind uncle. But Dick was thoroughly reckless to-night. Elsie's words just now had shown him how entirely her love was given to Stephen Brent, and he could not feel contented or happy with the mere idea of marrying her. He wanted her love, he told himself, and he would have it.

He felt utterly lawless and demoralized ; he felt capable of flinging Stephen Brent over the cliff's edge, if at the last moment he appeared to claim his love. And Elsie would be answerable for all that might happen, he thought, and she alone, because of the false hopes she had given, and the passionate longing for her love which she had thereby excited. As his reverie deepened, in his endeavor to find a way out of his perplexity, his restlessness subsided, and he started when the first note of the bells sounded across the downs. Then the full peal of silvery music came sweeping overhead, as if the stars were ringing joy-bells there.

Elsie's heart was so buoyant that it seemed to her doubt or sorrow could never more touch her with their dark wings ; she felt lifted up from earth and all its

petty vexations. To her the bells sang of peace and love in distinct words ; over and over again she heard the message sent to the shepherds. She felt in love and peace with all, and especially with poor Dick.

Suddenly the bells stopped, and the village clock tolled out twelve.

There was no one in sight, only Dick, who stood leaning against the flag-staff.

Elsie looked round. It seemed to her impossible that her dream was not fulfilled. There was no moon, but the stars gave light enough to see any one approaching. She went to the edge of the cliff, and peered over into the darkness.

"Stephen," she cried, heedless of her cousin's presence—"Stephen, I am here ! Come to me !"

Dick waited while she stood listening, bending forward over the crumbling edge. At last he could not bear it. He went forward, and laid his hand on her arm.

"It is not safe," he said ; "I who have been used to this place all my life would not run the risk you do, Elsie ; it is never safe, and in the dark you can't see where the edge is broken. Come, dear, it is Christmas morning, and you ought to be in bed."

"I am coming."

She drew her cloak tighter, so as to free herself from his touch, and then she started across the downs to Hillside.

BOOK EIGHTH.

CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

WHEN Elsie rose on Christmas morning, after tossing for some sleepless hours on her bed, it was still semi-darkness and she lighted the candles on her table. She had put on a dressing-gown, but the sleepless night had made her colder than usual, and she caught up the thick black cloak she had worn over-night, and wrapped it round her.

Mechanically she looked in the glass and started back shuddering; her face was deathly white against the black cloak that wrapped her like a pall, and on her face, framed by her soft hair, was written in living letters the story of last night. There was a wild agony in her eyes, a seeking, hungering look that she instinctively turned from, and then clasped her hand over to hide. Would this look stay, she wondered, when she went down stairs among the others? would the anguish she felt be read by them as plainly? For all through the night a terrible whisper had been repeating itself—repeat-

ing first in sharp notes that seemed to pierce her brain, and then in dull, muffled strokes that fell heavily on her heart, the same dread.

Her dream had been true. Stephen had been alive when she dreamed it ; he had been on his way to meet her, and some evil had happened to him. She dared not say what she dreaded, but in the night a horrible memory had come to her, and the shock of seeing her own face recalled this now and stamped it with truth.

Years ago, when a child, she had read an old play. An aged couple living beside the sea open their door one night to a shipwrecked traveller ; while he sleeps, the woman, who has once been rich and now murmurs at her changed lot, finds out that the guest has gold and jewels. She persuades her husband to murder the sleeping man, and then, in a locket hanging from his neck, sees her own likeness, and recognizes her long-lost son. It seemed to Elsie that she should not have remembered this tragedy unless some danger menaced Stephen, and she was powerless to help him, she could only pray. It might have shown her how much her judgment was unhinged, if she had been calm enough to see that she trusted less to prayer than to personal effort for the safety of her lover.

She looked out. Light was stealing over the sea ; even *while she gazed the broad gray expanse mottled with rose-color, and after a while shimmered with gold as the sun rose above the rosy clouds that had gone before him.*

Cocks were crowing, the sparrows chirped and twittered, and one by one the neighboring church-bells rang out their Christmas greeting.

Elsie felt sick at the sound ; a faintness crept over her, and she lay down again, powerless to do any thing else.

She fell asleep at once, and slept for more than an hour, so soundly that even the heavy tread of Mr. Limber's feet as he passed down the gallery failed to rouse her.

She roused at last, and, alarmed at finding how late it was, hurried downstairs. This saved her more than she knew ; she had really no time for any morbid forecasting of the judgment that would be passed on her looks. She was ashamed of being late on Christmas morning.

The farmer greeted her with so hearty a kiss that his rough beard sent the paleness from her cheeks.

She did not look at Dick, but Mrs. Limber's smile was unusually sweet as she wished her a very happy Christmas. She found beside her plate a little heap of Christmas gifts, but the writing on the farmer's offering made her cheeks tingle more than his beard had done.

It was, "To my dear daughter Elsie." Her first impulse was to push it toward him, and say that she had no right to take it ; then, remembering the glad, beaming face with which he had wished her a happy Christmas, she felt that she could not cloud his joy to-day. *To-morrow she would make him understand the hope that had kept her watching last night, and the utter unreality of the words he had overheard.*

"I hope you have slept well?" he said; "why, what did you do with yourself last night? There was toasted cheese, and toast, and ale was kept hot for you till near twelve o'clock, and then Dick said you 'd gone to bed; you must have crept in like a mouse, Miss——"

"I did not sleep well," she said. "I suppose that made me sleep so late, but I am very sorry——"

"You 've no need, my dear. You 've only yourself to please at present. A single woman, you know, can do as she chooses;" he looked slyly from Elsie to Dick, and was surprised at his son's composure. Mrs. Limber sat watching Elsie, and she felt uneasy. The girl's paleness had returned, and the strangeness of her eyes told that she was over-wrought and agitated.

"Richard," she said, pleasantly, "I don't want to hurry you, but you said we were to be at church early so that you might speak to Mr. Roberts."

The farmer looked round as if he appealed for admiration.

"There was never any one half so thoughtful as she is," he said, "how she does it I can't tell; she does all her own remembering and mine too; she 's better than an almanac, I say. Now, my darling, I 'm at your service."

Mrs. Limber did not intend to start for half an hour or so—she had a new bonnet to wear—but she told her husband she wished for his taste in some little matter of detail, and the poor man was so flattered and delighted that he sat patiently in his chair waiting to give his opinion.

But at the exact time for starting his wife came in fully equipped.

"Do I look nice, dear?" she said; "now, we have n't a moment," and she carried him off with her.

As they went along the hard white road toward the village, she thought of Stephen's visit; what news those heaps of stones on either side could tell to Elsie as she passed! It seemed to her that the girl looked very ill, and this was tiresome, because if she were ill the marriage would have to be delayed, and this involved the risk of Stephen's learning the truth at Wortham. She had at last decided to let the future take care of itself, and to endure Elsie as the wife of her step-son.

"So many things may happen," she thought.

"How quiet you are!" said the farmer. "A penny for your thoughts, Harrie."

He looked down at her and thought her new bonnet suited her exactly.

"Well, I was thinking about this marriage. Is it to be in a fortnight?"

"I believe so, but I'll speak to her after church."

"Will you? Don't you think I had better do it. Girls are so shy about it; at least I know I was. You and Miss Lack settled it all; don't you remember?"

"I should think I did. Why it's not so long ago, and you don't look a day older, you little duck."

"There's the vicar," she said, "just coming out of his gate; had you not better go and speak to him?"

Mr. Limber went on and met the vicar just outside the churchyard. His business was soon told, as it merely related to some of the forthcoming village treats, and then he said,

"You may wish me joy, vicar. This is something like a happy Christmas for us ; my niece is going to marry Dick."

"Is that the case ? I wish you joy with all my heart,—with all my heart," Mr. Roberts said, and he thought how right his wife had been when she said Miss Neale's sorrow was too keen to last.

Meantime Dick and Elsie were walking to church side by side, but they did not look like lovers. Dick's eyes had a furtive, wandering expression, and Elsie's had the scared, seeking look in them that last night's work had written there.

They had not spoken. She only wanted to be left in peace, and did not know what to say. He felt that he held a treasure to which he could never find a key ; while he thought Stephen dead, it had been easy to say Elsie would learn to love him ; but now, with the terrible chance before his eyes that at any moment his rival might step between him and his love, he was conscious that he had never really believed his own words. He had only echoed Mrs. Limber's assertion, trusting implicitly to her greater cleverness, and her superior knowledge of her own sex.

But he loved Elsie. He looked at her as she walked beside him, and again he told himself he could never give

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her up. He would have liked to give her more time ; now that she had gotten over her first grief, every month would cheer and brighten her, and he would have been content to wait till she no longer made objection to their marriage. But he could not venture to do this, and, after all, he meant only good to her.

"Hang it !" he said, "I know I shall make an excellent husband ; she shall have her own way in all things, and that's all a woman cares for ; and if she'd married that skulking Brent, he'd have worshipped her for three months, and then he'd have cared no more about her. A sailor always makes a bad husband, from Lord Nelson downward," and Dick felt encouraged by what seemed to him a clever argument.

They had now come so near the church that they mingled in the stream of villagers sauntering in the leisurely way of their kind up the churchyard path. An old smock-frocked man uncovered his white head and stood by for Elsie to pass ; then he said to the old withered woman beside him :

"They two will be one soon, Molly. I heard Mr. Limber say so to parson."

Elsie made a sudden movement which parted her from her cousin, and she went alone up the aisle to where she sat with the school children.

CHAPTER II.

BRENT PAYS HIS LAWYER A VISIT.

WHEN Stephen left the farm, his idea was to go back at once to London ; but he would not take the near way along the cliffs to Blackwater, he would not do any thing which would remind him of his false love. He would not have believed Mrs. Limber alone, he had always distrusted her, and felt what she would be unscrupulous in the means she used to further her own wishes ; but the farmer's testimony to that she said had been spontaneous, and it had borne the unmistakable ring of truth.

He hurried on savagely along the white, hard road, trying vainly to think of other things. Not once did he even think of turning back and seeking Elsie. In all he did, Stephen Brent felt and acted strongly ; it might have been possible to him, he thought, by sheer strength of will to make Elsie waver in her new love, and feel sorry for her desertion—nay, he might even win her back. But he did not want to win back a girl who had openly promised to marry another man, and that man Dick Limber.

“Casting pearls to swine with a vengeance,” he said, bitterly, and then all the old scoffs, the sarcastic verses, and stinging sayings of men rejected or deserted by women, “fair and faithless” as Elsie, came back, and

Stephen did as we all do in the first chill of misfortune, he believed every syllable that the black despairing spirit whispered, and encouraged her till there was no place left for hope.

Even then, but for an accident, he might have been compelled to sleep in Blackwater, and it is possible that on Christmas morning he might in some way have learned the truth. But often on very small things hang the greatest events of our lives. The carrier passed him in his empty cart, and asked him to get up beside him. The man had been keeping Christmas Eve on his way home, and he drove at double his usual pace, and so Stephen reached the station before the last train for London had started.

He was not in a Christmas mood as the train set forth. He could read on the faces of two fellow-passengers that they were going to happy homes. He cursed his fate in his heart, and wished he had gone down with the *Europa*.

Something whispered to him to travel next morning to Wortham and cheer his aunt and Peggy by the sight of him, but he turned from the suggestion with disgust.

It would take some time, he thought, before he could bear to see them or Wortham, where he would be at every step reminded of Elsie. He reached London late and slept at the station hotel, and when he woke next morning the air was filled with the clanging of Christmas bells.

He breakfasted and went out aimlessly, more with the

idea of overcoming time than with any more definite notion ; but a crowd was sweeping into St. Paul's as he reached it, and he went in with the rest. The sermon was not specially striking, but somehow, when he came out, Stephen felt calmer, less at war with the whole world ; and he resolved that, as soon as his business with his lawyer was settled, he would go and see his aunt and Peggy.

Before he sailed he had made a will leaving a large portion of his money to Elsie, and all that he could leave of the rest between Mrs. Short and Peggy. The landed property would pass to a distant cousin in the event of Brent having no child.

It seemed to him now that this will had been unjust. Mrs. Short had told him that Elsie would have her uncle's property ; the legacy he had meant for her would be a welcome addition to Mrs. Short's slender income. He felt that he could not bear to touch the money destined for his false love ; nor could he bear to settle down as he had intended, and live in England ; he should go back to his profession and try to make his aunt and cousin as happy as possible.

He had to wait a few days before he could see his solicitor. Christmas Day had fallen on a Friday, so that there was the temptation to take a holiday till Tuesday, and when he went to his friend's office he learned that he *was still* out of town. When he did see him, he saw that *the lawyer looked at him keenly when he spoke of making a fresh will.*

"I suppose you think," the lawyer said, dryly, "that Miss Neale has more than enough. So she has. By her uncle's will she comes into about £40,000 when she is of age."

"Is Mr. Martin dead then?"

"Ah, I forgot you have been away. Yes, poor fellow, he died early in the year in a railway accident in the United States. Miss Neale will be a rich wife for some one.

Stephen kept his face quiet, but he was silent a minute or two, then he took a paper out of his pocket.

"Look at this," he said, "and tell me what you think. I want to give my aunt about four hundred a year for her life, and then I want to settle something on my cousin in case she marries."

"You will be marrying yourself."

The lawyer put his hand over his mouth, to hide a cynical smile. He had read Stephen clearly.

"The young fellow has been disappointed," he thought, "and is doing this on impulse. In six months' time he will have got over his sour grapes."

"No, I shall not marry."

"Well, then, do nothing in a hurry. Go down and see after your property; I believe it is in urgent want of a master's supervision from what I hear. Poachers are rampant, and there's a good deal of distress in the village this winter; if you find the house habitable, why not ask *Mrs. Short* and her daughter to stay with you, and help

to get things in to order? There 's plenty of time to alter your will, my good friend."

Stephen fixed his honest gray eyes on him, and the lawyer fidgeted, and then laughed.

"Well, well," he said, "when you have lived as long as I have, you will know that the least surprising part of human nature is its faculty of changing its intentions. This faculty is part of our stock in trade, you know."

Stephen was too much in earnest not to feel annoyed at being put in the same scale in which his friend judged others.

"I must trouble you to judge me as I am," he said, "not according to any analogy which your experience leads you to judge by. I must have that will altered at once—a railway accident is just as likely to carry me off as the man you spoke of. Miss Neale is too rich to need my pitiful legacy, and I cannot risk leaving my aunt and cousin unprovided for."

The lawyer leaned back, and settled his spectacles.

"All very cogent reasons. Very well," he said, "however it 's the usual way. You come to me for advice, and like most young men, you only want me to carry out your wishes. Very good, I 'll look into the matter. But I hope you mean to travel down to Northamptonshire without delay. I wrote some days ago, and told your bailiff to get some place ready for me, and he writes to say *he and his wife* have been living in the manor-house to keep it aired ; so there 's no trouble about that."

Stephen was not sorry to find an excuse suggested for delay in going to Wortham. He felt little interest now in the place which he had thought of so lovingly as Elsie's home, but still every thing there would be new and fresh ; for he had never visited the eccentric relative who had made him his heir. And he said that on this point, at any rate, he would take his lawyer's advice.

"But I shall not change my mind about the will," he said ; "and I wish it prepared in accordance with the instructions I have given against my return. I suppose I shall arrange matters down at Adsdean in a week, or perhaps less ?"

"About that you must judge for yourself. I advise you not to take any one's word about any thing, but to look closely into things yourself—nothing like a master's eye, you know."

"All right, thank you. Now I 'm off. Good-day."

Then, as the sailor reached the door, his friend said,

"I say, Stephen, there 's plenty of good sailors in the world, but, if you don't stay at home and see after your land, it won't take care of itself. Think about it my lad."

Stephen smiled and nodded, but the old lawyer shook his head.

"He 'll go to sea again ; it's that Miss Neale, confound her ! Why could n't she have patience and wait ? I suppose *she* jilted him for some one else."

The cynical old bachelor shrugged his shoulders and

smiled. He was sorry for his client, but he had once suffered from the caprice of a woman, and it was not quite unpleasant to find himself in good company.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHORTS HEAR THE GOOD NEWS.

IF Stephen Brent had had time in which to tell his story to Mr. Limber, it is possible that the farmer would have felt more sympathy and compunction at his hasty retreat.

He and two of the crew of the *Europa* had clung to the mast of the doomed vessel when it was cut adrift, and had floated for several days ; first one man had dropped off, and then the other, and Brent was picked up by a Portuguese merchant-ship bound for Java.

The crew of this vessel were chiefly Lascars, the rest Portuguese, but their nationality mattered little to Brent. His strength had enabled him to outlast his companions ; but when he was taken on board he quickly became insensible. This was succeeded by the ravings of fever, and when he recovered consciousness, he was in a convent in India, where he had been kindly nursed by some French Sisters of Charity.

It was long before he could regain strength, and also before he could get put into communication with English authorities. The poor nuns had hard work to live and

to minister to their sick ; they had no worldly knowledge or means of helping him on his way.

Mrs. Limber had wondered, and perhaps with reason, why he had not written to announce his escape ; but for months after his shipwreck he was too weak and listless for any exertion. He thought he should never live to reach England.

He decided it was better not to contradict the report of his death ; if he was supposed to be dead, it would be cruel to give Elsie the bitter sorrow of mourning him twice over. . . . So he went on months after months. The Portuguese doctor told him that much of his cure depended on patience, and on keeping his mind free from anxiety. Probably the doctor erred on the side of caution, for when at last Stephen started on his way to Galle, taking advantage of the escort of a party of travellers who had rested at the Indian convent, he was astonished at the rapidity of his recovery.

At Galle he found himself among friends and old companions, some going eastward, some home-bound. An old Indian colonel, a friend of his father's, was greatly touched by the story of his adventures, and proposed that they should travel together. He saw that Stephen, in the first flush of new-found health and strength, was not inclined to be careful, and he watched over him through the journey as if he had been his own son ; and when they reached land, made him take much longer rests than Stephen's impatience saw need for ; but the

old man had been so kind that he did not like to vex him. They had not reached London till the day before the sailor came to Hillside.

He had only stayed to report himself at the Admiralty as the survivor of the wrecked *Europa*, and to see his lawyer. He had written from Paris to Elsie and to Mrs. Short, but he had asked his aunt not to say to Elsie that he was going direct to Hillside. He seemed to take it for granted that his engagement was known to the Shorts ; for in speaking of Elsie, he said : " I want to give the dear girl a joyful surprise on Christmas Eve " ; and when Peggy saw the words in the letter as she looked over her mother's shoulder, crying and laughing with delight, she said :

" It will be hardly a surprise. Elsie expects him on Christmas Eve."

At this Mrs. Short had turned round, her cheeks aflame with curiosity.

" Why, Peggy, what can you mean ? You can't have known this good news and kept it from your mother ! "

But before the impression could take shape, Peggy's arms were round her mother's short, fat neck.

" Good-for-nothing little mother." She kissed her lovingly. " As if I could have willingly kept such a joy from you. No, Elsie had a strong conviction that Stephen was not dead, and she dreamed that he came back to her on Christmas Eve."

The widow wiped her eyes.

"Poor dear child!" She said it as if she meant Elsie, but she gave Peggy at the same time a sly look, which brought the color to that young damsel's cheeks. "How happy she will be! It will be a blessed Christmas to us all, Peggy."

Peggy looked grave.

"To us, perhaps; but the Limbers will be disappointed, and perhaps you can't blame them. They wanted to keep Elsie always."

Mrs. Short looked unbelieving.

"I don't expect they want Elsie so much as they want to keep the money in the family. I hardly believe that such a woman as Mrs. Limber wants a step-daughter nearly as old as she is."

"That's the puzzle of it," Peggy said, thoughtfully. "And yet she told me that she and Mr. Limber both looked on Elsie as their daughter, and wished she would marry her cousin."

Mrs. Short sat thinking. It seemed to her that it would not be pleasant for Elsie to remain at Hillside in this change of circumstance, and that she was bound to offer her a home.

"In a few days," she said, "Elsie will write and tell you her good news, and then, Peggy, she must come and stay here till she marries Stephen."

Peggy clapped her hands and danced round the room in ecstasy, but she stopped suddenly to ask whether his room must not be got ready for Stephen.

"I don't know how I feel," she said. "I seem to want to laugh and cry all at once. To think that we shall really see the dear fellow again, and that Elsie is going to be happy—oh ! mother, it is too good"; and then she fell to kissing her mother till Mrs. Short had to cry out for a respite.

The room was got ready, and sundry dainty dishes were added to the Christmas fare, so that Stephen might have a little festival to greet him in case he should not be hospitably received at Hillside. But Christmas-day passed over, and so did the three days following it, and not one line came from either Stephen or Elsie.

"Happiness makes people a little selfish sometimes," Mrs. Short said on the evening of the third day. "I suppose they have so much to tell one another that they have no time to think of us."

"I don't know," Peggy said. "I never saw Elsie do a selfish thing."

Peggy was uneasy. Her old distrust of Mrs. Limber made itself heard, and she longed to know what had happened at Hillside.

It was possible that Stephen had been detained in Paris, and she could well understand that Elsie would not write while she was in suspense ; but when a week had passed, and still there were no tidings from either, Peggy grew seriously anxious, and she asked her mother *whether she ought not to write to Elsie and learn what had happened.*

She wrote, but no answer came.

She wished she could have gone to Hillside, but she knew that her mother would not consent to this after Mrs. Limber's behavior; and Peggy shrank from the idea of seeing Dick with cheeks that glowed as she remembered that he could no longer hope to marry his cousin.

The only way seemed to be to await in patience the course of events.

Some days after she had sent her second letter, she and her mother were sitting over the fire, wasting time, Peggy called it, while her mother said she rested her eyes and saved candles. In truth the good lady often enjoyed a nap in this genial semi-darkness, when she had drawn her basket-chair close to the fire, and crossed her neatly shod feet one over the other on a stool of her daughter's needle-work. Peggy sometimes sat watching the fitful light dance over her mother's face, or, when she found thought taking a sad tinge, she got out her knitting and set to work on some stockings which she had promised to Mr. Limber.

"I shall send them whether Mrs. Limber likes it or not," she said this evening, as she stirred the coals to make a blaze, and then drew a stocking from her work-basket; "he was always kind to me, and it was very good of him to send us the goose."

A sigh came at the thought that she should never see *Hillside* again.

Elsie would leave it, and then, of course, the acquaintance would cease, for Peggy knew that her old friendship with Mrs. Limber could never be put on the same basis. Her idol had shattered itself too completely for any putting together again.

Mrs. Short roused from her nap.

"There's Mr. Gordon's knock, Peggy dear; won't you light the lamp?"

"All right."

Peggy was glad to be roused from her musing; no comfort had come from it, for she could not bear to think of Stephen and Elsie as selfish and forgetful. In fact she could not admit such a belief, she was sure something had gone wrong at Hillside.

Mrs. Short thought that the visitor was more polite than usual; he bent over Peggy's hand and held it a minute clasped in his.

"I have come to wish you a happy New Year," he said, letting his words fall as if he had a special right to them, "but I had not heard that it was likely to open with such good news as the return of your nephew."

Mrs. Short looked surprised. She and Peggy had stayed in every day expecting Stephen. They had not told any one of Stephen's return.

"You knew of it, of course," Mr. Gordon went on. "I went to town yesterday, and he was the first person I saw. *He said* he came back a fortnight ago, and that I could *tell you* you would see him very soon."

"Poor dear fellow," said his aunt, "how does he look? I fear he has suffered a good deal."

"He looks well enough," Gordon said, "but he's not in the spirits you might expect a man to be who has been saved from shipwreck; he seemed quite out of spirits."

"Did you hear if he'd been to Hillside?" Peggy said, impulsively.

Gordon gave her an inquisitive glance.

"I'm sorry I can't answer you," he said, pompously; "had I foreseen your anxiety, I could have questioned your cousin; as it was, I simply asked if he had been to Wortham—and he gave me the answer I have repeated."

It seemed to Peggy that this news only increased her anxiety, and during the remainder of Mr. Gordon's visit she was so absent and preoccupied that her mother scolded her when the visitor had taken his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LIMBER PLEADS FOR DICK.

ELSIE had given up her incessant pacing up and down on the edge of the cliff; she had taken a horror of the sea, for she now believed that it held the body of her lover. There was something to her unutterably dull and lonesome in the broad gray expanse that stretched out before her windows, colorless and lifeless as *her own future*.

For she battled with the hope that still made itself felt ; she told herself she was growing impious, like the girl in the ballad ; she would go on loving her darling to the end, but she could no longer hope to see him on earth.

All Christmas-day she had been stupefied ; she had not been able to realize her sorrow. Her uncle and Mrs. Limber had been kind, but they had left her in peace, and so had Dick. It had been a strangely quiet Christmas evening for Hillside, and, when at last the old cook Bab came and announced that the mummers were in the house-place, poor, tired Elsie had crept up the staircase unobserved, and had gone to bed in hopeless misery.

To-day she had become conscious that some change was impending. This was the third morning since her vigil beside the flag-staff, and she noticed a sort of nervous impatience in her uncle's manner toward her. More than once he turned and looked at her as if about to speak, and then checked himself ; while Dick's kindness was oppressive, it met her every wish—she felt entangled in i

She had left the table soon after the early dinner. and had come upstairs to think.

She resolved to leave Hillside ; she was sure that her uncle Edward would have sanctioned her doing this under the circumstances in which she was placed ; she would take refuge with Peggy and her mother. She *could* come back to Hillside once or twice in the time *which* had to elapse before May, but she could not stay

here now. She felt tempted to go away at once, not only from a longing to be with her friends, but from a dread of coming evil. She was roused by a message from Mrs. Limber asking her to come downstairs.

She found Mrs. Roberts and her daughter waiting for her. The vicar's wife gave her hand a pressure, and said she wished her joy. Elsie supposed this was a form of Christmas greeting, and she returned it. At which the daughter smiled, and then looked at Mrs. Limber.

"But you are not looking quite so well as you did a week ago, my dear Miss Neale," Mrs. Roberts said. "I thought I never saw you so bright as when you were walking with your cousin on the downs."

Elsie smiled.

"People's looks vary," she said.

"But I hope you will keep on your knitting-class, my dear. The children greatly prize the care you so kindly bestow on them. I hope you won't give that up."

Elsie felt puzzled. It seemed as if Mrs. Roberts had divined her intention of leaving the farm.

"Do you think they care much?" she said. "They seem to think it a sort of play-time, I fancy. Yes, I think of giving it up for a time."

She was conscious that Mrs. Limber shot an inquisitive look at her, and that she had an amused smile on her dark face.

"May I take it for you?" Miss Roberts asked. "I mean till—till you come back." She gave a little laugh.

and then she added: "I will, of course, go on with it after if you wish."

"Thank you."

Elsie felt still more mystified. What was the meaning of this devotion from Miss Roberts, who had never paid much attention to her since Mrs. Collingwood had taken her up so warmly? But Elsie was glad of this opportunity of announcing her departure to Mrs. Limber.

"Before I go, perhaps I had better call at the parsonage and just tell you what each of the girls is doing. I teach some of them darning, as well as knitting."

"A very useful accomplishment indeed. How well you have been brought up, dear Miss Neale! I foresee the blessing you will be to the parish."

Mrs. Roberts' eyes were full of that unction with which a parson's wife is apt to regard a wealthy parishioner, but she suddenly bethought herself that it would be unwise to offend the elder Mrs. Limber for the sake of propitiating the bride-elect.

"Dear Mrs. Limber"—she gave Harriet Limber a sugared smile—"my husband says he can never be grateful enough to you for the way in which you have taught those boys to sing the Christmas hymn. It was such a relief from last year. They actually went together, and in time."

"I don't know about that." Mrs. Limber's ears had *ached at the discord* which, after all her careful practice *with them*, the village choir had made. "I really think,

unless you can do better, it would be wiser to give up hymns."

Mrs. Roberts sighed ; but she had learned to dread an encounter with her keen-tongued neighbor, and she contented herself with the smile which she could always summon, and : " Oh, no, I think we can't give up hymns, you know," leaving Mrs. Limber disappointed at not having provoked an argument.

" Well, then, dear Miss Neale, we ought not to stay longer, for I 'm sure you have plenty to do. I wish you every happiness "; and, to Elsie's intense surprise, she bent forward and kissed her.

Miss Roberts followed her mother's example, though she had to stand on tiptoe to reach Elsie's unwilling cheek.

" So glad," she whispered, " though it was a sort of surprise to us, don't you know ? "

" A surprise ! what do you mean ? " It was dawning on Elsie that she was utterly wrong, and that the meaning of this visit had yet to be revealed ; but at least Miss Roberts did not intend to reveal it.

" Oh, yes, of course, dear Miss Neale, we know. Good-bye ; I will come and get my instructions about the knitting-class—it will save you trouble."

She nodded and followed her mother, who was in the porch talking to Mr. and Mrs. Limber.

When the visitors went away, the husband and wife came into the parlor one after the other, and Elsie turned on Mrs. Limber, heedless of her uncle's presence.

"What do they mean by what they said?" she asked. "I had not told you I was going away—how should they know any thing about it?"

She was looking at Mrs. Limber, and it seemed to her that, though she smiled, her dark eyes were more than ever unfathomable. But it was Mr. Limber who answered :

"Going away!—what does the child mean? You ain't going, Elsie—you can't be—you 're going to marry Dick, you know—you said so."

Elsie stared at him. His face was full of pleading earnestness, and there was a pathetic appeal in his voice; before she could answer, he went on :

"I told the parson on Christmas-day that it was all settled, and that the wedding would be in a fortnight ; you will have no time to go away first."

"But, Richard,"—his wife put her hand on his arm,—
"Elsie is only thinking of going to London to see about fineries and so on ; besides, I scarcely think the wedding can be in a fortnight. I told Mrs. Roberts so just now."

"Told Mrs. Roberts !" Elsie looked very angry. "Do you mean that they were congratulating me just now?" She stood a minute pressing her hand on her forehead, while every thing stood out clear and distinct, and she saw herself entangled in what appeared to her a conspiracy.

"Of course they came to congratulate you, dear." Mrs. Limber spoke very softly and sweetly ; she was determined that her husband should not blame her be-

havior to his niece. "Your uncle announced the engagement to the vicar, and Mrs. Roberts has lost no time in doing the proper thing. I only wonder your friend, Mrs. Collingwood, has not been over too; but perhaps she has written instead?"

Elsie turned on her; her cheeks had flushed and her eyes were bright with indignation.

"You know she has not written—you know this is all a miserable mistake—a falsehood, in fact!" She spoke with such strange vehemence that for a moment even Mrs. Limber stood in awed surprise, while the farmer's mouth opened widely—he seemed electrified.

But Mrs. Limber had known that this explanation must come, though she had not looked for it quite so soon. She had more than once rehearsed mentally a scene with Elsie at which she had decided her husband should be present. She knew that in Mr. Limber's love for his niece lay her one hope of success; for, artificial as the woman was, her perception told her that reality succeeds where acting fails, and she could at best only feign a wish to have Elsie for a daughter-in-law; but she knew that if her husband could only get his feelings into words, speak out some of the longing which she had grown so tired of listening to, Elsie would be deeply moved. Rapid as light the thought came that quick repentance would follow on Elsie's outbreak, and that in the rebound her uncle's pathetic pleading would find *a way to his niece's heart.*

"Well,"—she drew a deep breath—"you and your, uncle seem to have misunderstood one another, and, as I had nothing to do with it, I shall leave you to settle it together."

She gave her husband a look full of wounded feeling, and went out of the room.

There was a silence. Elsie could think more easily now that she was freed from the restraint of Mrs. Limber's presence, and she began to see that she had been unjust at least toward her uncle. He was so simple and confiding that he had believed she meant to marry Dick. Elsie had trusted to his wife's better knowledge, and to Dick himself; she knew it must be impossible to either to believe that she could forget Stephen, though she might give up expecting him. Now she wondered at herself, and at her own reticence.

She was conscious that it had sprung from a good motive, an unwillingness to make mischief between husband and wife; but she wished she had appealed directly to the farmer, and told him, at whatever pain to herself, the true story of her love for Stephen Brent.

As soon as the door had closed on Mrs. Limber she began at once:

"Uncle, Dick knew I was not in earnest when I made that promise; he must have known it."

Mr. Limber had still the scared, pained look that had come into his face when Elsie had said she was going away. Spite of his rough and homely ways, he had a

gentle nature, and this had been so deeply stirred that he was forced to give it way, and let emotion pass into words, before he could calm himself.

He took the girl's hands into his and looked at her with tender, beseeching eyes.

"Now don't ye, Elsie; don't ye break my trust in you. It don't take from the worth of any other woman if I tell you what I never thought to say, though maybe I meant you to have learnt it without words. I've trusted you fully, my dear. I could as soon believe the sun would fail to shine as that you'd say what's not true—the disappointment will be bitter enough, God knows; but that's nothing, my dear—a mere flea-bite compared with the pain of having to give up the idea I've got of you, Elsie, as fixed in my mind as fate."

Elsie was touched, and she pressed the hand that held hers.

"You are so good to me; but indeed, uncle, I have been true."

He shook his head.

"Hush, my dear; don't let us have words about it. What I want to say is this,"—he put up one hand to his collar, and plucked at it, as if the words choked him,—
"some one has made a mistake—no true girl trifles with an honest man's love, Elsie," he said, with a dignity that surprised her. "You have led poor Dick on hoping for you till you've taken the heart out of his body; you must marry him, my girl. You'll love him fast enough

once you 're married." Elsie drew her hands out of his, and turned away. "I did n't mean to say it"—tears stood in his honest eyes—"because it's hurtful to ask you to do for the father's sake what the son should be aim sufficient for; but, Elsie, I want you for a daughter; you shall do as you please; no one shall cross you or vex you; you'll be the sunshine of my old age. Say yes, Elsie, and make us all happy."

His voice had broken as he went on, and as he ended he bowed his head, and she saw two or three tears fall over his face. She hesitated. She was trying to find words, but she could not summon courage to tell him how her promise had come about; it seemed cruel and needless to assert her love for Stephen.

She went up to him and kissed him.

"Forgive me, I can't do what you ask now, dear—perhaps I can never do it—but you must be patient with me. I do not wish to marry at all."

And then she went away; she felt no strength in her to continue the discussion.

CHAPTER V.

PEGGY COMFORTS STEPHEN.

MORE than a week went by at Adsdean before Stephen Brent felt himself free to go to *Wortham*. At first sight he decided that his bailiff was

an incapable drunkard, and the man's furtive looks and confused manner at his sudden, unannounced arrival made him suspect dishonesty. He dismissed him summarily, and for the time being installed the old gardener as manager; but there was so much to be done with regard to neglected drainage, fences, timber, and also even about the land itself, some of which had been badly farmed, and that which was not let utterly neglected, the last proprietor having been bedridden a year or so before his death.

Stephen spent all the time he could out-of-doors, in the house he was forever picturing the life he would have led there with Elsie. On his first arrival, he had gone mechanically through the rooms, and instinctively, as it were, without effort of his, each room had given itself a name, and had seemed to belong to her. No, the lawyer's plan would be impossible; he might persuade Mrs. Short and Peggy to go down and live at Adsdean and see after the house, but it could not be a home for him.

Elsie haunted it; as he went up the gloomy staircase at night, he saw her flitting along the gallery, and even in sleep she haunted his dreams, always with a sad, expectant face, as if he, not she, had been faithless.

At last it seemed to him that he was not wanted any longer, and he wrote to Wortham to say they might expect to see him.

Mrs. Short felt wounded; when she had read the letter she said more than once:

"I think, Peggy, if Stephen went to Adsdean, he might have come to us. I thought he was with Elsie."

Peggy kept her thoughts to herself ; she had written to Elsie, and no answer had come to her, and now it was plain from his letter that Stephen had been at Adsdean for some days. She was uneasy ; for even if Elsie were ill, she thought, she would have managed to write. Beyond the joy of seeing Stephen again would be the relief of consulting him, and of hearing what really had happened.

She was very busy on the day of Stephen's expected arrival. Her mother looked on with indifference while the girl rearranged the bits of old china, and brought in in triumph a handful of Christmas roses from the garden, and some straight twigs of jessamine, covered with pale yellow blossoms.

"You are taking a great deal of trouble, child, and you make the room very cold by running in and out ; I am afraid it will be all thrown away on Stephen."

When her mother did not call her nephew "Steenie," it was a sure sign she was displeased with him.

"Never mind,"—Peggy's eyes and cheeks glowed with her efforts—"even if he does not notice individual things, he will feel that we have tried to do the best we could to welcome him."

"I think he might have been sure of that." Mrs. Short pretended to be absorbed by her newspaper, but in a minute Peggy had taken it away, and putting her arms round her mother's fat, short neck, she gave her a hearty kiss.

"Mother dear," she said, looking very bright and saucy, "you must not be cross to poor dear Steenie when he comes. Just think what it has been to see Elsie after such an absence and such a sorrow ! I do not wonder if he quite forgot our existence, and I am glad he went to Northamptonshire before he came to us, because now he won't want to hurry away."

"You always manage to see every thing through your own glasses, child,"—her mother was busy straightening her cap, which the loving hug had displaced; "however, I suppose it 's the best way ; a blind man never sees a fog, you know."

Peggy had gone to the window and was looking up the road ; she knew by the softening in her mother's voice that she would not be cross to Stephen.

"He 's coming, mother !" she cried out. "He 's browner than ever, but he looks awfully sad and old, not one bit like jolly old Steenie."

She ran out of the room and down the steps, so as to meet her cousin at the gate.

"You dear fellow !" she said, as she kissed him, "what a happiness to see you again ! I am so glad ; and Elsie—is she quite well ?"

Stephen grasped her arm tightly.

"Don't ask me any questions, Peggy," he said, gravely, "I can't talk about her."

Then he went on to meet his aunt, who was at the parlor door, while Peggy stood stupefied with astonishment in the passage.

It was amusing to see how Mrs. Short's displeasure evaporated under her nephew's kisses ; she threw both arms round him and sobbed on his shoulder.

It was not only that he was her one dearly-loved nephew—the bonnie boy she had helped to rear before she had a child of her own, for she had been married some years before Peggy's birth—but Stephen's face recalled so much, all of her life that was worth remembering, and the dear companion who had shared its joys and sorrows ; though Stephen was in no way related to the vicar, it seemed to the good woman that her husband was nearer to her when she was in the young sailor's company, Stephen was deeply touched by this reception, and he let his aunt lead him to the cosiest arm-chair, placed close beside the fire, while she sat next him, keeping his hand in hers.

Peggy seated herself in a little straw chair of her own opposite them ; she was divided between triumph at her mother's behavior and intense anxiety about Stephen and Elsie.

It seemed to her as if the subject would never come up.

First, Stephen had to relate his adventures, and then to be questioned thereupon. Peggy thought her mother would never leave off asking about the details of his fever, and then giving many prescriptions and cautions about care-taking. Next came inquiries about Adsdean. Peggy listened yet more attentively, but she could hear no refer-

ence to his future life there. Mrs. Short had a good deal to say on this subject also. She gave Stephen advice about his cottages and their inmates, also about the tenant farmers.

"I believe aunt," he smiled, "Mr. Fletcher's idea is not a bad one. I wish you and Peggy would go and live at Adsdean Manor House, and manage the place your own way. You would do it much better than I should."

Mrs. Short stared, and then she smiled at him.

"You mean, you would like us to go down and get it ready for you to live in ; get your servants, and so on ? it would be pleasant but you must let me think it over, my dear. I lead such a quiet life now, that such an idea is too much for me all at once—what do you say, Peggy ?"

But Peggy was looking at her cousin. The intense sorrow in his face wrung her heart till it ached.

"You must decide, mother." She rose up, and went to the door. "Come out, Stephen, and look at my Christmas roses. Let us leave mother to think it over."

Stephen rose up slowly, while Peggy went into the passage, and muffled herself in a plaid. He was not willing to face what he knew lay before him, and yet the question must be answered sooner or later, and perhaps the sooner the better for him.

They went into the garden through the empty greenhouse ; for in winter the glass door of the parlor was kept fast closed. But, now that she had got her cousin alone, Peggy's courage was gone. Her tongue felt stiff. It

seemed to her she should never get her question uttered. So they walked down the narrow path side by side till they reached the plot of dark green leaves, with here and there a silver-white, yellow-tasselled flower gleaming among them.

Peggy bent over the bed to gather a half-blown blossom for her cousin's button-hole, and, now that she could no longer see him, her courage came back.

"Stephen, dear, you must tell me about Elsie. Why are you silent about her? What is it? Have you quarrelled?"

She kept bending over the dark leaves. Some instinct warned her not to look up. She would have seen a pitiful sight. He grew pale, and dark, and stern all at once, and stood with clenched fingers and quivering lips, trying to be calm.

"I have—not seen her," he said, hoarsely.

Peggy's terror at the unnatural sound of his voice made her forget every thing. She quickly raised her head,—and she saw the anguish of the whole story in his eyes.

"There is some mistake—or Stephen—Stephen, you cannot mean that Elsie is dead?"

"I wish she were."

"Oh! how horrible, how wicked you are!" she clasped his arm tightly, in a terror that he would break away from her without saying what had happened. "You must have quarrelled then. Why don't you tell me?"

she took his arm in her vehemence ; “ why have you not seen her ? ”

“ I told you not to ask ! ” he said, sternly. “ God knows I don’t want to rail like a woman ; but she is nothing to me—worse than nothing. She is going to marry her cousin.”

“ It’s a falsehood ; ” Peggy’s face showed flame color even against the scarlet plaid. “ Why did n’t you see her ? You should have insisted on seeing her.”

Stephen was quieted by the girl’s passion.

“ I preferred not to see her. I could have seen her if I had chosen ; but what I say is no falsehood, Peggy, it is true.”

“ Tell me,” she said, breathlessly. “ It is all that woman’s doing, I know.”

He turned to her with sudden interest.

“ You mean Mrs. Limber. Why should she interfere ? ”

Peggy looked at him meaningly, till he flushed under her eyes.

“ She has more than one motive : one is that she wants Elsie’s money in the family, so she is trying her utmost to get her to marry her cousin, and—” Peggy hesitated. She could not tell Stephen all she feared—“ and I know she won’t let Elsie marry you if she can help it. I don’t care what she said, she’s a thorough hypocrite, and—and—she would not stick at a falsehood.”

Stephen stood thinking, then he said : “ She did not

say much. She said she wished Elsie had kept true. It was Mr. Limber who told me the marriage with his son was settled."

Peggy felt bewildered ; then she took courage.

"Stephen dear, that woman can make her husband believe any thing she chooses."

He shook his head. "I thought that too at first ; but he's not a man who would tell a lie, and he asserted positively that she was going to marry his son ; it's no make believe," he said, gloomily.

Peggy had been feeling in her pocket.

"Stephen, will you wait here for me, I won't be a minute?" She ran away without waiting for his answer, and never stopped till she reached her bedroom. She unlocked her treasure store, a square leather box, a gift of Elsie's, and took out the last letter she had received from her friend, the letter in which Elsie had shown her belief that Stephen would return, and also how fondly she loved him.

Then she ran back to her cousin ; he was standing where she had left him, still stern and gloomy-looking.

"Read this, dear," she said, and she put Elsie's letter into his hand.

But he gave it back to her as soon as he saw whose the writing was.

"This is nonsense," Peggy said, "you shall hear it, at all events." She began to read it aloud while her cousin stood by frowning ; when she came to where Elsie alluded to her dream, Stephen suddenly broke in—

"What does she mean?"

And then Peggy related as exactly as she could remember it, the story of the dream. "It's a pity you should hear it from me, for, of course, I spoil it in the telling; if you saw that darling tell it, with her lovely blue eyes full of hope and love, you'd feel so ashamed of yourself, Stephen," she said, with a pretty frown.

"Should I?" said Stephen, incredulously; but he was shaken in his conviction.

Peggy stole her hand into his.

"Look here, do you mind coming and talking to mother about it? She has such a wise head, and she knows all about the engagement—she knows every thing but the dream."

"Will you let me read the letter now?"

Peggy looked at him in saucy triumph.

"It would be a just punishment if I said no; but there, you may have it. Of course, no sensible woman expects a lover to be reasonable."

Stephen walked slowly toward the house, reading the letter as he went. It shook him terribly; it would be so sweet to believe those loving words and the fondness so timidly shown. Once he could hardly check a wild impulse to kiss the paper which her dear hands had touched. At last he folded it and gave it back to Peggy.

"Well?" she stopped just as she was going into the house,

"There is one strange thing in the letter," he said; "she ought to have heard from me when she wrote, and she says nothing about a letter. I wrote to her some days before I wrote to you."

"There, I knew it. She never had your letter," said Peggy. "Do come in to mother. I begin to understand her silence and every thing, and you must start off for Blackwater by the first train to-morrow."

Stephen stood still and let her go into the house alone. Whether he willed it or not, he had no power against the flood of joy and glad trust that rushed in upon him, almost dazing his senses by its sudden light.

"Thank God," he said, "this is a second deliverance from shipwreck."

CHAPTER VI.

STEPHEN TAKES HIS AUNT'S ADVICE.

MRS. SHORT listened in silence to her nephew's account of his visit to Hillside. Then she settled her spectacles and stared at him with a very unbelieving face.

"I am disappointed in you, Steenie," she said; "I did not think you would have been so easily imposed on; it seems to me you have played as carelessly with your happiness as a child plays with a toy. You flung your ball into Mrs. Limber's hands, and she is unscrupulous. Go

away, Peggy, my dear," the good woman said, abruptly, "I shall scold him better without you."

Then, when Peggy departed, she turned round on her nephew.

"I believe it is because you sailors live shut up with men all your lives that you are so easily taken in. Oh, Steenie! a woman like that Mrs. Limber—who, I'm sure, meant to have married you herself—will never let you have Elsie, if she can prevent it—now, don't stop me, there's a good fellow."

She put up her hand to check his eager denial.

"A woman sees what a man—a sailor especially—is blind to. Is it likely, I ask you, that a simple, truthful creature like Elsie should, only a month ago, when she was here, have been full of love for you, and yet promise as soon as she went back to Hillside to marry her cousin? It's unnatural and absurd too."

"My dear aunt, I'm sure you are right, but——"

"Oh yes, I know you believe in Elsie's innocence now, but you ought never to have doubted it. Now look here, that woman has strong motives for keeping you apart. She is determined to get Elsie's money into the family. She went so far as to tell Peggy of the alterations she meant to make in the house. Ah! and she has another reason besides."

Mrs. Short shut her lips, and nodded her head with a *significance that even Stephen understood to have a personal reference.*

"Well, aunt, what 's that ?" he said.

"Well, my dear"—the widow was flushed, for, spite of all her resolves, she had become excited as she went on—"if his step-mother had left young Limber alone, he was becoming attached to Peggy, and I believe Mrs. Limber is determined that shall not happen."

"And does Peggy care for him?" said Stephen, simply.

Mrs. Short threw back her head with a snort of impatience.

"Really," she said, "I don't fancy your cousin is likely to care for a man who is making love to some one else, do you?"

There was so much scorn in her voice that Stephen felt alarmed at his suggestion. Perhaps, if he had been less absorbed in his own love, he might have read Mrs. Short's indignation differently.

"Then you think the best way is to take the chance of meeting Elsie out-of-doors?"

"Certainly I do. If you go and ask for her, you will not be allowed to see her, and you only lead that woman into fresh falsehood."

Stephen could not help smiling at his aunt's emphasis on "that woman;" but he sat thinking, and, though he did not contradict Mrs. Short, he had resolved before he took leave of her that he would go boldly to Hillside, and *insist* on seeing Elsie.

Peggy had told him that no answer had come to her

letter, and had also told him her conviction that Elsie's silence was the work of Mrs. Limber.

"Poor woman!" the kind-hearted sailor thought, "they lay it on thick enough. She may be only doing as her husband bids her."

His anger was roused against both father and son; it seemed to him they had tried to rob him of Elsie between them; and on his way to Hillside early next morning he resolved that, instead of asking to see Elsie, he would ask for Mr. Limber, and charge him with having deceived him. He had gone through so much in this fortnight that it seemed much longer ago than that since he had come up the lane that led from the village to the farm.

Sam Brown stood looking over the farm-yard gate, and Stephen thought it might, after all, be as well to avoid a meeting with Mrs. Limber. Perhaps he could see the farmer without going to the house.

"Can I speak to Mr. Limber?" he said to Sam.

Sam had been watching him all the way up the lane, but he started now, and screwed up his sly black eyes, as if he were disturbed out of a reverie.

"That you can't, sir. I'm main sorry, but the master went out a while ago, and he ain't expected back for ever so long; and Mr. Dick's out too."

Stephen paused. As he looked toward the house, he saw a shadow retreat from a window that looked into the chicken-yard.

"I want to see Miss Neale," he said. "I suppose I'd better go round to the front."

Sam stared at him ; he would have grinned, but a look in Brent's face stopped him.

"Well, 't would be best, master. It ain't no business o' mine," he muttered ; "he and she can fight it out. 'T is just as I thought 't was, and he 's the right sort, after all."

"Who were you speaking to, Sam?" come in a very decided tone at his elbow.

It was Mrs. Limber, and Sam had never seen his mistress as he told his wife, "with such a face on ;" her delicate eyebrows met in a frown, and her eyes were full of sullen anger.

"That were the gent again as come a' Christmas Eve."

Sam could not altogether repress a leer of triumph when he saw fear in his mistress' face ; for though she had dreaded it, this was the first time she knew positively that Sam had been aware of Stephen Brent's visit ; but she had no time to think or to answer, the maid came out of the house-place and told her mistress Mr. Brent was waiting to see her.

"In the parlor?"

"No, ma'am, the gentleman followed me right in ; he seems not to believe that Miss Elsie has gone away."

Mrs. Limber smoothed the frown out of her face, and went back through the chicken-yard, while the maid and Sam Brown exchanged glances behind her back.

But, as the maid—a new one—prepared to give her

opinion that there was something odd about the visitor, Sam winked at her with energy.

"Sukey's your name, ain't it, my dear?"

"No, Mr. Brown, it's Susan."

- "Well, then, Sue, my gal, look you here; there's more ins and outs in this here than is meant for such as you and me to take notice on. You go along softly; you jest see and hear and say nothing till you sees a way of turnin' it to account, mind, my dear."

He put his finger to his lips and grinned, showing his teeth up to his gums, but Susan tossed her head; she was a very smart young person, far above being taught her duties "by a mere farming man, who saw after pigs and calves, and smelt of manure."

Mrs. Limber was very pale as she stood before the door of the house-place; she had known this meeting must come, but a hope had lingered that Elsie would have been married first; then she could have met Stephen Brent so differently. She knew that this must be their last meeting; she might for a time baffle his search for Elsie, but he would find her at last.

"We will part friends," she said. "I will make it very hard for him to think evil of me."

It was wonderful how quickly she saw how to act. He would never see her husband or Dick; she was safe in that way. Instinctively she put her hand to smooth her hair, and then when she went in she started. There was Stephen standing on the fatal hearth-stone, with his back to the blazing logs.

She had shaken hands with him before he could decide whether it was best to meet as friends.

"You want Elsie?" she said. His eager look answered her as she went on, "Yes, and if Elsie had stayed here all would have been well; she could have seen you, and could have given you her own explanation; but she has left us."

"Where is she, then?" He believed that this was untrue, and that Elsie was in the house.

"If I could only tell you, I would gladly do so. Of course my step-son knows; but Elsie mistrusts me—she either cannot or will not see that the conduct I have had to pursue has been simply obedience to my husband's wishes. She went away without even saying good-bye."

Mrs. Limber was speaking the truth, and there was truth in her eyes and in her voice. Stephen felt puzzled.

"I do not understand Elsie," she said, looking at him with eyes that seemed to beseech him not to judge her harshly. "A month ago—less even—I should have said that she loved you, that she was pining away with sorrow for your loss; and then all at once I heard what my husband told you. He had already told it to me; whether he had persuaded her or not, I don't know, but he said, and I can't tell you how surprised I was when he said it, 'Elsie is going to marry Dick.'"

He looked at her, and she did not flinch. Stephen felt bewildered. Mrs. Limber's account agreed with

Peggy's in a way, and yet he could not doubt Elsie's own words. Evidently there was something amiss between her and Mrs. Limber.

"But do you mean," he said, "that you still think she intends to marry her cousin?"

"Of course; what else can she do? She has accepted the congratulations of the neighbors, and I suppose, as soon as she comes back, the marriage will take place. If he had been at home Dick could have told you every thing; he is in her confidence, of course."

Stephen's right hand clenched itself involuntarily; he looked stern and moody.

Mrs. Limber's face grew very sad, her heart ached sorely; at last tears filled her eyes. This was their last meeting, and he was going away displeased with her.

"You are the only real friend I have ever had," she said, "and it seems so sad that you should judge me harshly. Can't you feel for me a little? Can't you see that I am unable to explain things fully without being disloyal? Oh! Mr. Brent," she went on, passionately, "because a woman, feeling that she had given her all of love without return, goes and foolishly flings herself away in a mad moment of despair, don't you think for all that she is bound to be true to her husband, and to try to carry out his wishes even against her own judgment?" —she covered her face with her hands.

He stood silent, with bent head, and arms hanging straight by his side, as if he were awaiting a sentence.

She walked up and down once, for her agitation had become rent, and she feared she should say more than she wished to say.

"Yes, Stephen Brent"—she stopped in front of him, and spoke in a low, pleading voice,—“I know it—I feel it. You can't believe in me, you will not, and yet if you only knew how I have tried to serve you! No one else knows. Elsie has always misunderstood me, and met my affection with coldness and distrust. Ah! you think you have suffered. You don't know, you can't, what it is to have your love thrust back on your hungering heart—never to get love, except that which you do not value.”

There was a pause.

Then Mrs. Limber went on.

“Ask yourself,” she said. “Is it likely that I could wish to be superseded here? When Elsie marries my step-son, I at once become old Mrs. Limber, and am put away like a bit of useless furniture. I don't pretend to be better than I am, and I know I should not like this, it would wound me at every turn; it's bad enough, I can tell you”—this with a touch of conscious spite that she knew would sound genuine—“to see Mr. Limber so set on the marriage. I sometimes think Elsie is quite as much to him as I am.”

“That cannot be.” He meant to speak soothingly, but his mind was bent on finding Elsie with as little delay as possible; he was not thinking at all of Mrs. Limber. *She knew it, and the dark, passionate look he remembered so well glowed in her eyes.*

"You are impatient," she said, in a voice that was half touching, half scornful, "in one way I cannot wonder, in another I do ; but it is always so, the best and truest will ever find their happiness in loving, not in being loved. You deserved that Elsie should have kept true to you. Now I doubt if you will win her back ; but, as I say, she keeps me in the dark, I know nothing, not even where she is."

"Did no one see her go ?"

"No."

This time she had to tell a direct untruth, but she had gone too far to hesitate. She had watched Elsie's departure from her window, and had made sure of the way she took.

"She cannot be far off," he said, looking steadily at Mrs. Limber, "if she went on foot ?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have told you all I know," she said, in a languid voice.

Something in the tone touched him, though he did not trust her. He took her hand in his.

"Forgive me, if I seem ungrateful, and only thinking of self. Somehow, I can't help it."

She gave him a look that seemed to pierce through all coldness and distress, and smote his heart with pain for the anguish he read in those dark eyes. It was long before he *could shake off the remembrance of that look of mute reproach.*

"You cannot help it now," she sobbed. "God forgive you for what you have made me. Now go—go at once—and forget you ever saw me."

But instead he took her hand, and pressed it pitifully in his.

"Hush," he said, gently, "don't wrong yourself. You are brave, and you will be happy ; I am sure your husband is a good man."

He shook her hand heartily, and went away.

When the door closed behind him, she tottered to the mantel-shelf, and leaned there. Then she looked down on the stone at her feet, and all the flush faded from her face. She was as quiet and still as the stone itself.

Presently she murmured : "It may be for the best, as people say." She gave an abrupt laugh. "I sometimes thought I might have had to get rid of her, if she married Dick."

CHAPTER VI.

"BETTER LATE THAN NEVER."

ELSIE was standing beside a writing-table in the library of Trant manor-house. She looked unhappy and ashamed ; her eyes were bent on the ground ; her head, too, was bowed, and her face was deeply flushed. Opposite to her, her cousin stood erect, his eyes bright with anger, one foot in advance of the other, and one hand stretched out toward her, while he poured out angry, bitter words.

"I tell you you have—deny it, if you like. That proves nothing. You have spoiled my whole life—you have made me a fool and a laughing stock, you have——"

The door opened, and Mrs. Collingwood came in.

"How do you do, Mr. Limber?" she said. "Why don't you both sit down;" and then she placed a chair for Elsie and seated herself in one close by. "Is it going to thaw, do you think?" she said to Dick.

"I don't know," he said, impatiently. Then he looked at Elsie again. "Can you see me if I come to-morrow—I mean, can you see me alone?"

Mrs. Collingwood was going to speak, but Elsie said, in a low, humble voice,

"No, Dick; Mrs. Collingwood is going away, and she will take me with her; we had best say good-bye now."

She held out her hand, and he had to take it in silence, though words were burning to be spoken; but he did not choose to make Mrs. Collingwood a witness of Elsie's indifference to his love; he left the room almost in silence, and went out of the manor-house with a disturbed face.

The Squire's groom stood holding Dick Limber's horse, but he hesitated to mount; there was a feeling in his mind that he must go back and repeat some of the harsh words he had been saying.

Yesterday he had followed Elsie to Trant manor-house, but Mrs. Collingwood had refused to let him see his cousin; to-day she had come into the room before he *had nearly reached the end of his reproaches, and had*

seated herself with such calm unconsciousness of being an intruder that Dick felt sure it was purposely done,—she knew Elsie's story.

But he was in too dogged a mood to have yielded, if Elsie had not refused to see him ; then he saw that it was useless—at any rate, for the present—to persevere.

He got slowly on his horse and rode away ; then, as he thought of the scene he had come from, he flushed with anger.

“ They are both laughing at me, by Jove ! ” He urged his horse with a sudden movement, and it started into a gallop. This did Dick good.

As his pace slackened again, he recalled Elsie's attitude—how sweetly and humbly she had said good-bye. Was it true that she had never cared for him, or for any man but that fellow Brent ? Which was he to believe, Elsie or his step-mother ? He could not tell why, but it seemed to him that, after all, it might not only have been Elsie who had made a fool of him. Was it possible that to serve her own purposes Mrs. Limber had wilfully led him on in the belief that perseverance was all that he needed to win his cousin's love ? He grew so abstracted, as he tried to follow out this idea, that his horse's pace slackened to a walk.

All at once he roused, as he looked across the bare stretch of downs to the sea, he remembered what his father, and Mr. Martin, too, had said about sailors, and how strong his uncle's prejudice had been against them ;

then came the remembrance of what Mrs. Limber had said of this particular sailor, that she had heard he had always been a flirt. Dick did not know it, but he asserted this to himself all the more strongly because for a moment he had felt as if he were acting like the dog in the manger. A word from him would restore Elsie and Brent to one another, but he could never speak it.

"No, it has been a merciful escape for her," he said, turning resolutely from the suggestion; "he would have made her life miserable. A true-hearted girl like Elsie deserves a man's whole love. Ah, if I had not been a fool when first she came to us!"

He soon reached the farm.

Sam Brown was ready to take his horse to the stable; but, instead of going off with it, he lingered. Dick turned away; he was going for a stroll along the cliff. He did not feel in a mood to meet Mrs. Limber and submit to her questioning.

"There's been a visitor for you, Master Dick." Sam's eyes twinkled slyly.

"What sort of visitor?" said Dick over his shoulder.

"Him came o' Christmas Eve." Sam could not help grinning when Dick turned round as sharply as if he had been stung.

"Is he here now? who did he ask for? who did he see?" he said, impatiently.

Sam left off grinning; he was never quite sure of Master Dick's temper, any more than he was of the mistress'.

"No, zur," he said, quickly ; "he went away when he 'd seen the mistress."

"Which road did he take ?" Dick asked, eagerly.

Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"He just went back the way he came, but they tell me at the Flitch o' Bacon that he comed in there and asked if any one knew whether Miss Neale was staying in the neighborhood."

Dick look angry, but he only said,

"Well ?"

Sam scratched his head in leisurely fashion, and hitched up the band of his trousers.

"Well, you see, sir, no one knowed ; for, you see, none on us knows where Miss Neale's gone to. She bides at Wortham, sir, don't she ?"

He enjoyed the young fellow's discomfiture. Dick stood thinking for some time.

"Look here, Sam ; you can bring Bob outside the gate again. How long do you say it is since Mr. Brent left ?"

"It may be an hour, it may be less," said Sam, carelessly ; but he was interested in this incident, and already he speculated as to which of thay chaps as he phrased it would get the best of the struggle ; for, looking at Master Dick as he stood frowning there in glum silence, he felt 'he young master meant fighting. "Would you like your streavy whip, sir ?" he said, as Dick got on his horse *father* *ain*.

how No, you fool. And look here, Sam ; if any one comes

here asking for Miss Elsie, you can say she's gone on a visit to Mrs. Collingwood at Trant Manor.”

Then he galloped down the lane at a pace that sent the stones flying into the hedge-banks for shelter.

“I'm blessed!” Sam looked utterly puzzled; his eyes had actually opened widely. “I can't see to the bottom o' this. Seems to me the Missus and Master Dick ain't pullin' together as they used onst on a time.”

Dick rode on without giving himself time to think. He had made a sudden resolution; he determined to judge Stephen Brent for himself without any advice from Mrs. Limber. He rode through the village, and a few miles along the bleak, treeless, white high-road, presently he saw before him a figure hurrying toward Blackwater. Though the man was so far off, Dick felt that he was Stephen Brent, and at the sight of the rival who had robbed him of Elsie's affection, an intense hatred burned in his heart; by his own act he could not yield her up.

Then there rose up before him her pleading face, those shame-stricken sweet blue eyes fixed on him, and then drooping under his reproaches; he seemed again to hear the words she had said so short a while ago—

“Ah! Dick, there is no happiness in life for me, it lies buried under the sea.”

His heart swelled, and again he tried not to think, and urged his horse forward.

Stephen Brent heard the horse's gallop, and looked back, while Dick was yet some way off, and recognized him.

He turned at once ; there was no one in sight, and he determined that Dick Limber should not go on his way till he had told him where to find Elsie. Seeing that the other was coming fast toward him, he stood still in the middle of the road, so as to prevent the chance of Dick's riding on if he meant to do so.

Dick pulled up his horse as he reached him. " You have been to Hillside. I came after you," Dick said, in a surly tone.

" Where is Miss Neale ?" Stephen's voice was even more unfriendly ; they looked at one another with angry eyes, and Dick's good intentions cooled.

" Why do you want to know ?" he said, rudely.

" You know why well enough," said the sailor. " I have been wanting to see you or your father to tell you what I think of the way in which you have both acted. I believe that your cousin has not heard of my return ; she has been purposely kept in ignorance of it."

He was looking angrily at Dick, and suddenly his heart was touched. A swift, sad glance shot out of the young fellow's eyes, next minute he tried to hide it by a frown.

" Look here, Mr. Brent," he said. " You 're going just the worst way you can to work with me ; but Elsie's not to blame for that ; what I do is for her, not you. I wish to heaven you 'd never seen her, or never come back, that 's God's truth Look here"—he had waited a *minute* to collect himself—" if you don't make her happy, *if you ever give her a moment's sorrow, or trifle with her*

in any way, by Jove ! you 'll have to reckon with me, that 's all. No, I 'm not done." Stephen's face was full of hope, and he tried to speak. "I was coming after you to tell you this, if I found you really wanted Elsie. So now I 'll tell you. She 's at Trant manor house."

He urged his horse on ; but Stephen stood right in front of it, and caught the bridle.

"Wait an instant ; you must hear me thank you," he said. "You're a fine fellow. I don't believe I could have acted so nobly. God bless you."

"Stand out of the way, will you ?" said Dick, pulling at the bridle. "Did n't I say I have not done it for you ? I don't want your thanks. Can't you feel you are best out of my way ?" he said, hoarsely ; and, as Stephen reluctantly let go his bridle, the horse sped along, and soon turned up a side road that lead inland.

Stephen drew a long breath as he looked after him, and then he hurried back along the bleak high-road.

"Elsie"—Mrs. Collingwood tapped at her friend's door—"will you let me in ? I have some good news for you."

Elsie had gone to her room after her cousin's departure ; she had told her friend she would not drive with her that afternoon. That was two hours ago, and yet, when she opened the door to Mrs. Collingwood, her eyes were *still swollen and red with crying.*

She was so sorry for Dick. She knew she had not wilfully deceived him, but it seemed to her, in the light shed by his bitter reproaches, that she had not considered his love seriously, or realized how earnest his hope of winning her had been. In her self-upbraidings, she forgot to take comfort in the thought of the liking he had shown to Peggy. But, for all that, she could not change, she could not be false to her own love. She could not marry Dick—that would make his life miserable. She must not go back to Hillside, and then she hoped time would heal his sorrow ; but she grieved over it, and cried till her head ached. It had seemed quite impossible she could drive out, and laugh and talk with her friend, who was inclined to be hard on Dick ; and now she shrank from letting her see her trouble.

But Mrs. Collingwood came in and shut the door.

“Sit down, dear Elsie,” she said.

But there was a strange look in her face. All the highly-wrought expression had fled out of it, and instead there reigned a brimming-over of joy, which was ready to fall in bright tears from her eyes.

Elsie could not speak ; her looks only questioned her friend. Her expectation was so intense that she could only hear a confused murmur of hope in the conviction that was mastering her.

“Yes, dear”—Mrs. Collingwood took her hand lovingly—“there is indeed good news. You have been right all through. Mr. Brent is safe. He has been wonderfully preserved——”

She waited. She was afraid to tell all too suddenly. But a lovely light shone out of Elsie's eyes ; she rose up and moved swiftly to the door.

"He is here," she said. "You need not tell me any more, dear friend."

She ran back and kissed Mrs. Collingwood.

"Yes, in the library, dear. You will find me in my room when you want me," said the squire's wife with a happy laugh, while the girl hurried to the library.

She stood a minute, with her hand on the lock, while her heart poured itself out in thankfulness, then she opened the door, and saw Stephen. . . .

"My darling," he said, "at last," holding her a little way from him so as to look earnestly in her sweet face. "How true you have been—how much better than I, who doubted you !"

"You could do nothing else," she said, simply. "It was my fault. If I had been more thoughtful for poor Dick, and less wrapped up in self, all this could not have happened."

"I don't know that," said Stephen. But neither he nor Elsie spoke of Mrs. Limber.

"Dick is a fine fellow," Stephen said presently, and then he told how they had met on the downs.

Elsie was greatly touched. "Poor Dick !" and she looked so sad that Stephen said, in a teasing voice,

"Perhaps, darling, you are sorry I came back, after all?"

The answer he got seemed to satisfy him.

CHAPTER VII.

"ALL 'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

TIME had stood still with Mrs. Limber. Perhaps she had fainted—she did not know—but the sound of heavy feet and jarring voices clanged on her dull senses as violently as the noise of a railway engine breaks up the stillness of some lonely valley.

She put her hands to her ears, and, rising to her feet, found that she was giddy, and scarcely able to stand.

The farmer and Dick-spoke as they came in.

"All 's well that ends well," said the first. "You 'll say so too, Harrie, though you 'll be main sorry for Dick. Why, what is it?—you 're as pale as a ghost, my pet."

Mrs. Limber did not answer him ; her eyes were fixed on Dick ; she put her hand on the mantel-shelf to steady herself.

"Take care," the farmer said ; "you look as you did last summer. Dick, stay by her, will you, till I come back?" and he hurried off to seek his favorite remedy, brandy and water.

Dick was almost as white as his step-mother ; all the rich color had died out of his face ; he did not even look at her.

"What 's all this?" she said, in a choked voice—"what has happened that I don't know?"

He had been trying to keep silence, but this provocation was more than he could stand against.

"What a false woman you are!" he said, bitterly, and the contempt in his eyes reached through the dull stupor of her anguish. "You know as well as I do; you can't be true or simple in the smallest trifle; you have ruined us all by your lies."

"Dick!" but she spoke faintly; her head was swimming, and she clung to the mantel-shelf to steady herself.

He thought she was shamming illness, and he went on.

"When that fellow came, why could you not say at once where she—Elsie—was? You have made us look like rascals."

His father came in; at the sound of Dick's raised voice he paused, then he saw his son's angry face, and he hurried forward.

"Hold your tongue, sir!—you ought to be ashamed of yourself—don't you see she 's ill?"

Then he put his arm tenderly round his wife and held the glass to her lips.

She just sipped it, smiled, and thanked him.

"Don't scold Dick, please, Richard—he does n't understand, that 's all. I 'll sit down, then I shall be all right." She sat down on the window seat, and forced herself to smile at her husband. "Please go away again, dear; I can't talk to Dick even before you—I feel too much for him."

Dick writhed and moved nearer the staircase.

"I sha'n't keep you long, Dick, if your father will go away." She waited, then she said, "Go away, Richard."

Mr. Limber was unwilling to leave her, but she spoke so firmly that he went.

"You are ungrateful, Dick," she said, pleadingly. "I have done all for your sake and for Elsie's, though she never loved me."

"For Elsie's!" he raised his eyebrows. "I don't think she owes you much."

"She may not think so, but I have worked for her happiness. She would have been happier with you than with him."

Dick stood kicking the floor—the old flagstones.

"You don't know and I do," he said. "I saw her this morning, and she told me how she felt about Brent."

"And you have given her up?" she said, breathlessly; she began to understand what was the matter with Dick.

"Now look here, Mrs. Limber,"—he looked very stern as he spoke—"I don't know what your notions of right and wrong may be, but when a girl tells me her heart is full of another man, and I know that man's alive, I don't care to make her my wife."

"You won't let me explain;" her color was coming back, and she felt less dazed. "I mean that you ought, as a friend of Elsie's, to do your best to keep that—that man away from her. He has no constancy in him, I tell you"—her heart smote her for the lie against Stephen, but she went on—"he'll only break her heart. Why, Dick, *he loved me once ever so much more than he loves Elsie.*"

A lovely, rosy flush flew over her face; she looked

young and pretty as her eyes drooped under Dick's surprised gaze.

"He loved you!" he said, slowly; then he stood thinking. "Why, then, did you treat him as a stranger the first time he came to Hillside?" he said.

"There were several reasons; one was that we had settled never to allude to the past, and also I had not spoken of him to your father. I thought it might make them both uncomfortable; besides, he was nothing to me."

"You had not cared for him, then?"

He was sorry as the words passed his lips. Mrs. Limber grew white and shivered again, though she tried to look calm.

"That is not your business," she said, haughtily; "but, when I refused to tell him where Elsie was this morning, I felt that I was doing the best I could for her, poor girl. However, no doubt he will find her."

"He is with her by now," Dick ground his heel into the old flag stones. "I rode after him and sent him back."

Mrs. Limber sprang up.

"You sent him back to her!" she said, vehemently. "I did not think you were such a fool, Dick Limber."

"Did n't you? You nearly made a rogue of me. If I had seen the man on Christmas Eve, I should have saved myself and Elsie a good deal. I hate the fellow for coming between us; but for all that I know truth when I see it, and I believe he's been true to her all this while."

"Coward!" she murmured; but she only sneered while he passed out of the house-place. This last blow had stunned her; she sank back again on the window-seat. . . .

Presently thought came back in a tumult.

They were together. All that she had planned and labored for was destroyed, brushed away like a cobweb, and Elsie was completely out of her power. She was strung up to a pitch of excitement to which any thing seemed possible. Once more she looked down at the hearthstone.

"I had her here all these months," she said; "surely some way might have been found—there are so many."

She jumped up and walked across the house-place. It seemed impossible to tear herself away from the place where he had stood looking at her. But now she hated the kindness she had seen in his eyes. It had been mere compassion, and at that very minute he and Elsie might be pitying her together.

"My God!"—she started away from the picture she had called up—"I could stab her to death." . . .

Presently her husband came back, and asked how she felt.

"Better, much better;" then, seeing that he still looked anxious, "we 'll have tea," she said, "that will do me good."

She went into the parlor and rang the bell. While the maid went in and out, Mr. Limber stood looking anxiously at his wife.

At last he said :

"You must make allowance for Dick, my pet. He 's behaved so well that he 's given himself an overstrain, and it 's bound to put him out, poor chap ; it 's come harder than as if he 'd never taken up with her ; we must let him down easy."

She looked at her husband. She was curious to know what he really thought.

"I 'm very sorry for Dick," she said. "Elsie has played fast and loose with him, and it will serve her right if she has chosen badly."

"I don't think badly of Brent ;" the farmer looked surprised ; "his coming back so soon shows he was in earnest before ; the only thing is—" he hesitated, "it 's a little awkward for us all, and I 'm too fond of Elsie to quarrel with her. I wish, my pet, you had let me tell her he came on Christmas Eve—it 's too late now."

"Let you ?"—she turned on him with sparkling eyes. "How could I prevent you from doing what you chose ? I despise a man who does n't act for himself, who does n't do what he thinks right. You could be positive enough when you wanted Peggy Short here."

Mr. Limber had been already, as he said, "jawed " by Dick ; altogether the day's transactions had been irritating ; he was very grave when he answered his wife.

"You 're not well, Harrie," he said, "and you've been thwarted ; it 's natural you should feel upset, but you said the truth just now. The right thing to do, and

mind you, Harrie, the *only* thing that will put us straight with Elsie and Brent, is to go over to Trant to-morrow morning and shake 'em by the hand. Will you go with me?" he paused, but she shook her head. A troubled look came into the farmer's face. "Well, you must do as you please, my dear; but remember what you said just now—I must do what I feel to be right to do; I shall go; you'll sleep on it, and think different in the morning."

"Even if she does n't go with me," he said to himself, "I can say with truth she is not well, and perhaps she ought to keep quiet to-morrow, she looks awfully bad. I'll have the doctor quick, if she don't mend."

In the evening Mrs. Limber complained of headache, and went to bed early. Dick had not appeared again since he left his step-mother in the house-place, and Mr. Limber sat alone over the fire with his pipe.

He was uneasy and full of shame, and shame was a new and most intolerable sensation to him.

"Harrie had me there," he said; "the girl was right. I was going to say she always is right, but I can't say that now. I ought not to have sent Brent away; he ought to have had a hearing." He paused. "Well, it's a lesson to me to use my own wits, such as they are, where the credit of the family is concerned. Yes, a man should guide his own house; and Harrie's such a darling, that she'll give in after a bit."

But he sighed. The other way had been very pleasant,

though of late—notably during Peggy's visit—he knew he had found his wife's yoke hard and exacting.

There shall be no quarrel with Harrie about it, poor girl. I 'll say no more to her," he said at last. "But I 'll just ride over and breakfast at the Hall. I 'll persuade her to lie abed, and have a cup o' tea there."

He shaded the light carefully with his hand when he went into his wife's room, and moved about very softly, but she was sleeping heavily.

In the morning she did not rouse till he was leaving the room, and then she asked sleepily what time it was.

He told her it was early yet, and he would order some tea to be brought to her at eight.

"Thank you," she said. "Kiss me, Richard, I am going to sleep."

Mr. Limber went round his farm happily. It was plain that his wife had got over her vexation. A good sleep would set her right.

Soon after eight o'clock his horse was brought round, and he rode over to Trant. He had bade the maid go in gently with the tea, and put it on his wife's table, so as not to disturb her. But when the woman knocked, Mrs. Limber was already up and dressed.

"Where is your master?" she said. "Has he breakfasted?"

"No ma'am; he 's just ridden over to the manor. He said he should get breakfast there."

"I shall lie down again. Tell your master so, when he

comes back ; " and Mrs. Limber walked to the window, from which she could still see her husband, and seated herself there.

He was not very long away. Elsie and Stephen were deeply touched when he asked them to forgive him and Dick, and frankly acknowledged that he had made a mistake. As he rode home, the farmer's heart was full of relief from the trouble of the previous day, though he was vexed that he had not been able to give a cordial message from his wife to the young pair.

"After all, Time's the great healer," he said. "I don't know how we should get along without it. After a bit, Harrie will have grown reconciled to the change, and, when there's no Elsie to hope for, maybe she'll consent to Peggy Short."

He felt a little nervous as to how his wife would take the news of his visit ; but he went straight into the house, resolved to have it over at once.

"Poor dear, I'll bear a scolding from her, if't will do her good."

Sam was standing at the farm-yard gate ; so the farmer got off his horse and went in through the house-place. His wife was not there, and in the parlor he found the maid clearing away the breakfast.

"I was to tell you, sir, that mistress was going to lie down again."

This was such an unusual proceeding for Mrs. Limber that he felt anxious, and he hurried up the staircase with-

out stopping to take off his heavy boots—only eager to reach his wife ; he went in as softly as he could.

Yes, she was still on the bed, but she was dressed, and lying almost face downward.

Something in her attitude made the farmer's heart jump.

"Harrie," he cried,—“Harrie, are you asleep?”

Then he bent over her to see her face ; he started back with a cry that rang through the house,—through the yard, startling even Pixie as she gambolled in front of Dick, who sat smoking sulkily in the summer-house.

Dick started up. “What was that?” he said, and then he ran in-doors.

EPILOGUE.

WHEN the leaves began to unfold their creases and the birds from early morning to late evening sang hymns of joy to them and to the daily opening blossoms, Elsie Neale was married to Stephen Brent in the parish church of Wortham.

That was a year ago, and now, on a sunny morning “in the sweet spring-time,” he and she stood talking just outside the porch of their pleasant home. Now and then their eyes wandered to the baby, as his nurse walked up and down with him in the sunshine.

Elsie looked very lovely, like spring itself—that is to say, an old-fashioned spring, in the days when winter did

not loiter till summer came, and the east wind did not chill and parch through more than half the year—the days when almost of a certainty “April showers brought May flowers.” This was a true spring morning ; Nature seemed ready to leap into fullest beauty, the south wind gently stirred the half-clothed tree branches, a fresh, nameless fragrance was in the air, and a hidden chorus came from the green leaves.

“Peggy and Aunt Short come on Saturday, don’t they ?” said Stephen.

“Yes ; I’m longing for dear Peggy to see our darling.” A glow of proud motherhood beamed in her sweet face. “She’ll spoil him, I expect, and aunt will almost eat him up with kisses—she so loves little babies.”

“Then she had better not come,” said Stephen, gravely ; “he is an awful little rascal, I know, but I can’t spare him.”

“He’s not a rascal—he’s a precious angel !” Elsie made a dive at the “angel,” and took him away from the nurse to kiss him comfortably.

“Do you mean to ask your Cousin Dick while Peggy is here ?” said Stephen.

“I think we had better leave it to happen as it will. Peggy might not like him to be asked to meet her ; it will be easy to tell Dick she is here ; if he really cares for her he will not need to be asked to come. I should be so happy if it all came right between them. It must be so dull for those two poor men alone at Hillside. Poor uncle has never looked the same since that sad morning.”

Stephen looked very grave. Presently he said :

"No, I'm afraid he will never get over that dreadful shock. But it is different with Dick. He is young, and his life ought not to be spoiled. I think his happiness will come yet."

And the two whose happiness had already come went slowly into the house with their little son.

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